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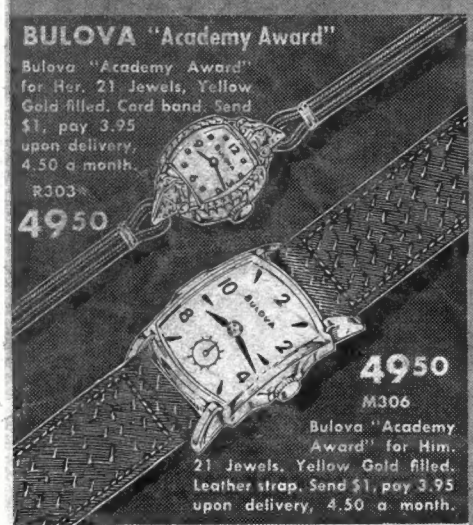

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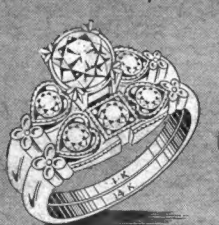

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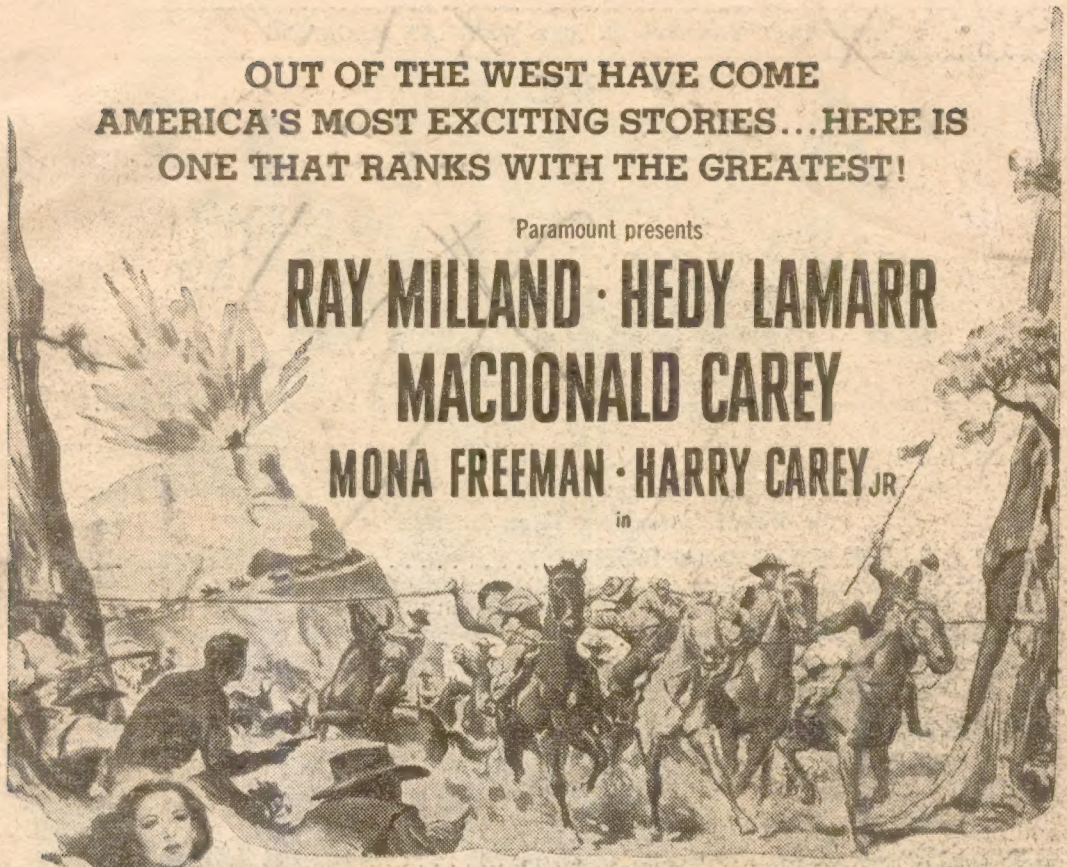

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OUTTRAIL CARAVAN

By
THE LINE-RIDER

"TARNATION and sufferin' catfishes!" the Old-Timer yelped the other night as he drifted over toward our front stoop. "Whole dad-blatted country is sinking fast, traveling lickety-split straight to the hound dogs. Danged if it ain't."

We raised one eyebrow and watched the Old-Timer hike himself up our stoop steps, following close behind his straggly gray handlebar mustache. The big pouches under his eyes were twice as hollow as usual, and his jowls were saggain like a bulldog's on bath day. This was nothing unusual hearing about disaster and chaos from the old-timer. He's the village's professional old-timer, and we've been hearing him harken back to the good old days year after year—or yore after yore as we keep telling him.

"Now what?" we asked him, sliding down a bit lower in our chair. Trouble with the Old-Timer was this—ask him a question, and he'd give you an answer!

He drew a dog-tired newspaper up out of his blue jeans, and handed it over to us. "Did you ever seen such dang big

(Continued on page 8)

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AUTHORIZED
RECONDITIONED FORD ENGINES AND ENGINE ACCESSORIES
(LOOK FOR THE AUTHORIZED RECONDITIONER'S EMBLEM ON THE RECONDITIONED FORD ENGINE YOU BUY

(Continued from page 6)

numbers in your life?" he asked mournfully.

We unfolded the paper. "Record debt for U.S. set at umpteen trillion dollars," the headlines screamed out at us.

We shrugged philosophically, laying the paper aside. "Anything seem to be bothering you, Old-Timer?"

"Danged country's falling apart at the seams," the Old-Timer muttered. "Gettin' such big figures you can't even read 'em anymore. Time was, in the old frontier days—"

"Time was," we laughed, "when they had even bigger inflation than we've got right now. Where? On the frontier you're always harkening back to."

The Old-Timer puffed himself up, his gray handlebars lifting belligerently. "Yeah? I'd like to know when."

"Gold rush times in California," we reminded him, settling down to spin a yarn about oranges at a buck apiece, eggs at twenty, shaves at fifty bucks a chin, haircuts at seventy-five.

Reminded us of a yarn came into our office just this morning, so we dragged out a letter from our pocket and unfolded it, handed it to the Old-Timer. Came in from Bob Young, who turns in a fact piece for us now and then. Figured you all might like to hear it too—riding along the Outtrail Caravan with us today.

Take it away, Bob Young.

AS GEORGE JONES stepped down from his small wagon to arrange for the purchase of $100 worth of feed for his stock animals, he didn't realize he was about to make a lasting impression on the financial and judicial history of California.

He looked up at the sign of Henry B. Stewart's feed store that day in 1879, and walked in. When he had completed his

(Continued on page 10)

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Dept. M-687
Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin

(Continued from page 8)

buying Jones told Stewart he would have to defer payment until his crops matured, but he was willing to sign a promissory note for the $100.

"That's perfectly all right, George," Stewart told him, as he seated himself at the desk and drew a paper towards him. He filled in the proper amount, date, and other pertinent data, then he paused.

"The going rate of interest now, you know George, is ten percent a month, compounded monthly," he observed.

"Yes," Jones replied, "I know. It's high but that is what everyone is charging. That's all right with me."

And the deal was sealed.

But Jones' crops failed and he defaulted on the note when due. Stewart was lenient, after all the interest was attractive, and he depended on Jones to make good when he could.

With wise precaution, Stewart had the note renewed at appropriate times to prevent it being outlawed in time. The unpaid note dragged along twenty-five years before Stewart became thoroughly exasperated and took the matter to court.

He first consulted attorneys and was assured of the legality of the note, then contacted accountants to determine the actual worth of the note plus the accumulated interst. They rechecked their figures, and submitted an affidavit as to the sum now due.

Judge J. R. Welch, presiding over the Santa Clara court where the claim was entered, peered thoughtfully over his glasses at the astounding debt involved. But in default of the suit, he ordered the claim entered against George Jones in the amount of $304,840,332,912,660.12—the largest judgment ever recorded against anyone, representing more money than was in existence in the world.

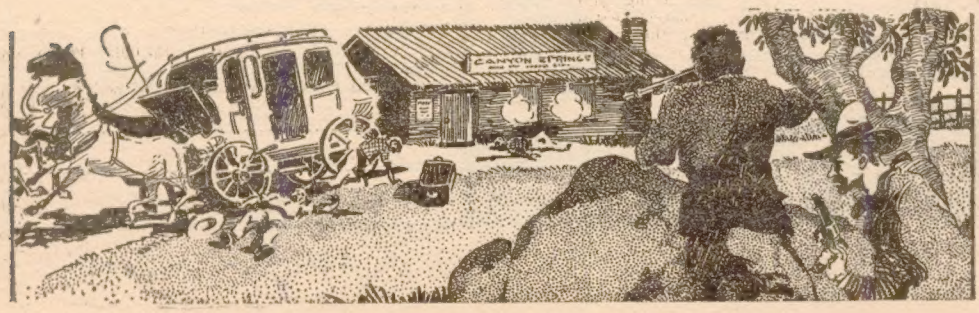
And all as a result of a $100 purchase of feed.

But to the credit and honesty of George Jones, it must also be recorded that against this three hundred trillion dollar debt, a credit of $19.69 was entered as paid on account by Debtor George Jones.

Well, those were history-making times, any way you looked at it. They were times when anything could happen, and usually did. They were times when men moulded history and set standards of endeavor that we still strive to equal.

We intend to keep on giving you in these pages of *Ace High Western*, stories of those fabulous days, each one dealing with some separate and intriguing aspect of life then. It was a rugged, tough life, and the country was full of salty, hard-riding characters. If you like your yarns vigorious, man-sized, and true to life, ride with us again next month in *Ace High Western*, and you'll get 'em.

Until our next issue hits the stands November 24, ***hasta la vista, amigos. Vaya con dios!***



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OR

THUNDER ON THE RIVER, by Charlton Laird
(Published at $2.75)

Don't miss this sensational new frontier novel of the upper Mississippi and the Indian country beyond. It's the pulsing, violent story of the tall Indian fighter, Mark Eldridge, who loved high-spirited Jeanne Brevaut, but whose longing for adventure was more urgent. Captured by savages, later married to a devoted and appealing Indian princess, he faced his bitter, inevitable choice between love and loyalty to his race. You will never forget the gripping climax to this new, exciting novel of the Western Frontier.

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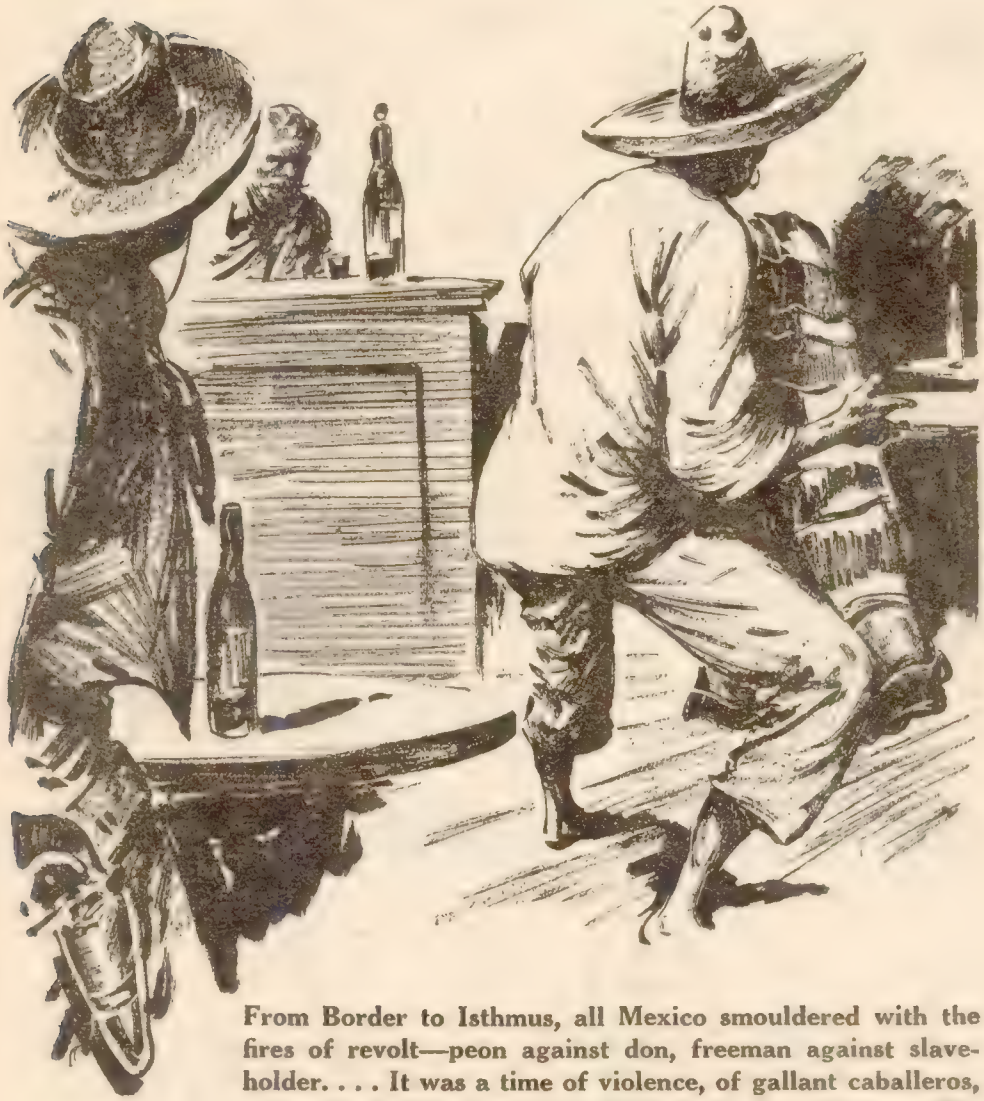
CHAPTER ONE

Adobe Wall Justice

IN THE PALE gray light of false dawn, the Castilian's face was smooth and impassive. Smoke from the cigarette held firmly between his lips coiled upward in lazy spirals. He stood easily, his back to the 'dobe wall—but not touching it for support. Before the open court-yard, the *gobernador's*



From Border to Isthmus, all Mexico smouldered with the fires of revolt—peon against don, freeman against slaveholder. . . . It was a time of violence, of gallant caballeros, of empire-builders and empire-busters. . . . Of men like Don Roberto Aguierra y Torreon, whose swift, dramatic rise and life-or-death struggle at the dizzy pinnacle of his power is told here. . . .

"Get out, *cabron!* Get back to your stinking goats!"

Thrill-Packed South-of-the-Border Novel

LAST OF THE FIGHTING DONS

By MAX KESLER

palacio loomed up whitely in the light.

Grouped on an upper balcony, a dozen figures stirred restlessly, waiting. Other eyes watched from behind closed shutters up and down the street. It seemed as though Life paused, breathless—waiting for Death.

He dragged deeply on the cigarette and looked at the slim *capitan* commanding the *soldados*.

Poor Enrique! This was not easy for him either. But then, that was why he had been given this particular command. Aware of their friendship, the situation had appealed to General Armandez' sense of humor. And for Enrique, as a soldier, to refuse to obey his commander-in-chief—*muerte!*

Don Roberto straightened as Capitan Diaz strode forward, his boots clicking loudly across the court. The *capitan's* face was strained, somber. Silently, he began to fold a handkerchief into an uneven five-inch band. His fingers were clumsy.

"It's regulations, Roberto." He swallowed hard—as if something was lodged in his throat. "We'll have to go through with it."

"No." Don Roberto shook his head. "The eyes were meant to see *all* things."

"But we can't afford to—" Diaz shot a quick glance toward the *palacio* balcony. His dark face tightened. "*Por Dios!* Does he think you a peon?"

Cursing softly, he spun on his heel and strode away.

Don Roberto relaxed. Absently—though his cigarette was but still half smoked—he drew paper and tobacco from his bolero pocket, tumbled tiny golden flakes into the paper, changed his mind, balled the paper and flipped it carelessly aside.

It struck the foot of a tall, hard-faced gringo standing in a doorway close by. The gringo did not move. He was breathing heavily; his hands were clenched into fists; his eyes were black as glowing coals.

"*Attencion!*" Capitan Diaz's voice cut unsteadily into the silence. Boots clicked, the *soldados* snapped erect, eyes straight ahead.

On the *palacio* balcony, General Armandez, *gobernador* of Sonora, leaned forward, his hands gripping the railing. He licked his thick lips. He did not like traitors.

"*Apuntirais!*" Rifles snapped to shoulders, bolts snicked as they were drawn, shoved forward. Above the distant Sierra Ladrones, a faint pink glow stained the sword held in the *capitan's* upraised hand.

Don Roberto Aguierra y Torreon shot a casual glance at the tall gringo, dragged deeply on his cigarette, looked toward dawn-splashed mountains—and let the curling smoke jet slowly out through his nostrils.

"*Feurais!*" Diaz's sword swept down with a heavy swish.

The crash of the rifles was ragged, uneven—as though each *soldado* had waited for another to fire first.

Smoke spurted from Don Roberto's mouth. His knees buckled. He fell forward on his face. The cigarette still burned between two fingers.

The sun broke above the Sierra Ladrones.

Capitan Diaz barked an order. The *soldados* clacked across the courtyard. On the balcony, the group straightened and disappeared inside. A woman's gay laughter floated down through the open door.

Slowly, the hidalgos, vaqueros, peons and dark haired señoritas who had watched in silence faded away into the morning.

Only Don Roberto's sprawled, velvet clad figure remained. Smoke curled lazily upward from the cigarette in his outflung hand. A mongrel dog trotted over and sniffed at the body. Then it, too, slunk

into an alley around the corner. It had not howled.

In the *casa* doorway, the gringo frowned. He looked at Don Roberto's body, shrugged, and walked slowly away.

A few moments later, a half dozen hidalgos carried the body to a waiting carriage. Accompanying them was Capitan Diaz, tense and watchful. Somber faced, the group drove out of Manteca with their burden of death.

Their destination was *La Hacienda del Oro,* ancestral home of the Aguierras. There Señorita Carmela, Capitan Diaz's sister, would be awaiting them, as would others of his family.

No one spoke a word.

FOR ONE who had been but recently executed, Don Roberto's mind was functioning remarkably well. Stretched out on the back of the carriage as it rolled slowly down the street, he looked very, very dead. A moment before, Capitan Diaz had splashed a skin bag of goat's blood over the front of his shirt to further heighten the illusion. For the danger was not past.

Thoughts were racing through his mind now in a rapid flow. He wondered if the gringo, Nate Trask, had gotten the message on that cigarette paper. And if the man would keep the meeting tonight. Or whether, frightened by what had happened, he would head back for the Cherokee Strip.

Señor Trask was an enigmatic person, about whom he knew but little. Only that Trask was an Americano, wealthy, an oil man, and that he was interested in exclusive drilling rights for oil in Sonora. And that like all gringos, he took it for granted that money could buy anything he wanted.

Which, Roberto conceded, was almost true—provided one went about it in the

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right way. Unfortunately, the gringo hadn't. Instead of petitioning the *gobernador* for a state grant— which would have cost him a good five million dollars— he'd gone straight to the Dons. Or rather to Roberto, their leader.

The gringo's proposition had been simple. If the Dons could be persuaded to give him drilling rights on their haciendas, there would be a quarter of a million dollars in it for one Don Roberto. Furthermore, each Don would receive a one-fifth royalty from every well brought in on their land.

Don Roberto mentally kicked himself now. For he had known from the beginning that such a deal was dangerous. In the first place, it would openly challenge the *gobernador's* dictatorial powers. Worse, Armandez would lose a fortune which would otherwise have gone into his pockets. Also, the revenue from the oil wells would strengthen the hidalgos' position at a time when their backs were to the wall.

Three reasons, any of them strong enough to cause trouble. And combined, to assure it. Yet because that inital payment, plus huge royalties later, might eventually permit the Dons to overthrow Armandez, Roberto had favored it.

Two nights ago, he had called the Dons together at La Hacienda del Oro and laid the proposition before them. Their reaction had been confused. Some had voted for accepting; others, fearing the *gobernador's* fury, had hesitated.

At the height of the argument, Coronel Felipe Riega, the *gobernador's* aide, had swooped down on the hacienda with a troop of cavalry. No one knew why, except that the *gobernador* had ordered Don Roberto's arrest. There had been a fight, a fight which had ended unhappily when a soldado's gun butt had purposely collided with his head.

Remembering, Don Roberto winced. *Por Dios,* but that cabron had felled him like an ox! Several hours later, he'd regained consciousness to find himself locked up in the *palacio* dungeons, charged with inciting *revolucion!*

Last night there had been a farcical trial—with Coronel Riega the chief and only witness, and *Gobernador* Armandez the judge and jury. Roles which both had enjoyed.

PARTICULARLY, the *coronel.* Arrogant, domineering, Riega had discovered that all his power could not buy him the blood of a grandee—nor could it force the Dons to accept him as an equal. But whereas the *gobernador* hated all Dons, it was Don Roberto who had become the active symbol against which Riega's hate was directed. Too, there had been trouble before between them over Señorita Carmela. Therefore, the *coronel* had lied well.

One Don Roberto Aguierra y Torren, a grandee, had been surprised at his hacienda by the *coronel,* and plans for a revolt against the government had been overheard. Furthermore, Don Roberto had been trying to persuade the hidalgos to assign drilling rights for oil to an Americano without permission of the *gobernador.* The defendant and his companions had resisted arrest, and force had been necessary to subdue them.

The *gobernador,* thick-set, heavy-faced, had meted out a quick decision. The verdict: Don Roberto Aguierra y Torreon, guilty of treason. The sentence: death. For the six hidalgos arrested with him: confiscation of their haciendas and banishment from the state of Sonora.

Swearing softly, Don Roberto started to sit up now, remembered that he was "dead" barely in time. He sighed unhappily and risked a glance through veiled eyes. His Don friends rode close on either side as a guard of honor. But through their ranks he glimpsed several lovely, tear-stained faces.

For an instant he forgot his desperate situation. *Oye!* How the señoritas grieved for him. Their hearts were broken.

"Por supuesto!" he muttered. "And why not? For who could ever replace the daring, the colorful, the romantic lover—Don Roberto Aguierra y—"

"You idiot!" Capitan Diaz whispered vehemently. "Must we all die because you love yourself so much? Why did I load my *soldados'* rifles with blank ammunition? Daring, romantic lover—*Por Dios!* Wait until Carmela hears!"

"Then will I cut out your wagging tongue!" Don Roberto retorted fiercely. "One word, and by the Blessed Virgin—"

He went quickly "dead" as a troop of cavalry suddenly surrounded the carriage. One glimpse of their officer told him that if he so much as dared breathe. . .

Reining up beside Diaz, Coronel Felipe Riega returned the *capitan's* salute with a careless flick of the hand. He demanded perfection of his officers, but neglected it himself.

That, however, did not apply to his personal self. A slim, handsome man with bold eyes and a thin, cruel mouth, he wore his bemedaled uniform with a faultless grace. He realized that, mounted on the black stallion, he was an impressive figure.

With his glittering epaulets and shiny, spurred boots, he had ran Don Roberto a close second in romantic conquests. Furthermore, much as they hated him, the hidalgos did not question his courage or his shrewd mind. He was a dangerous man.

BENDING over in his saddle now, he studied the sprawled figure in the back seat, noting the blood-stained shirt with obvious satisfaction.

"Your *soldados* are good marksmen, *mi capitan,"* he said, straightening. "You should be proud of them." There was a hint of mockery in his voice.

"Proud?" Enrique Diaz said bitterly. "That they killed off my best friend?"

"Proud that they destroyed a traitor," Riega said coldly. "It would be well for you to remember that, *mi capitan."* With an abrupt gesture, he reined away and led his troop down the street at a brisk canter. The carriage rolled forward once more.

"Madra de Dios!" Enrique whispered fervently. "Had it not been for the goat's blood—!"

After that, they lapsed into silence. Danger would ride with them all the way to the hacienda. Don Roberto was surprised that he was sweating profusely. It had been a close call.

He no longer felt like joking with his friend. The sense of his own responsibility weighed heavily upon him now. Ever since his father's death two years before, the hidalgos had looked to Roberto for leadership. For, despite his romantic escapades, he had courage, intelligence and the will to carry on the fight against Gobernador Armandez's growing oppression. And with the *gobernador* depriving them of one right after another, their lands being confiscated on the slightest pretext, the hidalgos' reign was definitely tottering.

Now because Don Roberto had chosen to gamble their future on that oil deal, six of his friends had lost their haciendas, he, himself, was officially "dead," and Enrique, his best friend, certain to be shot if the truth about that "execution" became known.

More dangerous, the *gobernador* now realized his own power. If he could shoot one hidalgo, why not others? Until finally, the Dons were no more and their haciendas belonged to one General Armandez, *Gobernador* of Sonora!

Don Roberto Aguierra y Torreon groaned inwardly. *Por Dios!* Not even the *courtesanas* would smile at him after this! Much less Señorita Carmela Diaz!

Enrique had betrayed him, robbed him

of at least an honorable death. Blank ammunition! *Cristofor!*

CHAPTER TWO

The Gringo Trask

LA HACIENDA DEL ORO gleamed whitely in the sunlight as the carriage drew up before the wide veranda. There was no sign of life. A black pall of silence lay over the place. But in the peons' quarters a half mile away, men mourned the death of their beloved Don Roberto. No one thought of working; this was a day for remembering.

As he dropped to the ground, Enrique warned, "Stay dead, Roberto, until we're inside. We can trust no one. *Aqui!* Carlos, Antonio, Sebastian! Give me a hand!"

Had the *gobernador* himself been watching, he would have been deceived. Don Roberto made a very realistic corpse as his friends carried him inside.

As they laid him on a couch in the spacious living room, there was a soft cry, a rustle of silk, and then a woman's soft lips were clinging desperately to Don Roberto's.

"Oh, Roberto! Roberto!" Tears fell freely on his upturned face. "Ah, *novio mio!* I prayed to the Blessed Mother! How I prayed, but it did not help!"

Warm lips, soft arms, the heavy smell of perfume, a heartbroken voice—*Santa Teresa!* Death had accomplished what life could not! And the hussy had pretended such coldness. *Oye!*

He might have continued to enjoy the situation had he not, unfortunately, forgotten that a dead man cannot return a kiss. Suddenly, the warm lips were gone. He heard the catch of her breath in her throat.

"Enrique!" she cried. "He's still alive! Oh, Enrique, we've got to do something! Perhaps—" Her voice broke off and an ominous silence descended over the room. Don Roberto held his breath in apprehension. He didn't know what to do.

"Don Roberto Aguierra y Torreon!" He knew from the tone of her voice what was coming, but it was too late. Not for nothing had Carmela Diaz inherited the fiery nature of the Castilian woman.

"Why, you—you faker!" A hand stung his cheek. "You *cabron!* So you'll play dead will you?"

Then she was on him, pounding his face with clenched fists, pulling his hair, banging his head, scratching, kicking, raking at his eyes with her pointed finger nails.

"You—you seducer of *courtesanas!*" she panted. "You'll take advantage of a woman, will you? Pig! I hate you, Don Roberto! I hate you!"

"Madre de Dios!" Don Roberto sought to bring this Spanish hellcat under control, but with no success. "Was it my fault? Did I tell you I was dead? Did I tell you to kiss—?" She hit him in the mouth and he swallowed the word.

There was but one thought in his mind now—to get away somehow before she murdered him. Love? *Madre de Santo Pedro!* If this was love, he wanted nothing of it!

She drew away, panting. And for the first time, he dared to open his eyes. Anger, he concluded ruefully, only made her more beautiful.

Tall, gracefully slender, she wore a black silk dress that set off the smooth ivory of her shoulders and the rich, swelling curves of her breasts. Her jet-black hair dropped smoothly to her shoulders in a rolled-under effect. Draped over a jeweled comb, a black lace mantilla swept downward.

Her face, flushed with anger, reminded him of a fine cameo. Her black eyes, however, were filled with smouldering flame that one did not find in a stone.

"Roberto, I could kill you," she said fiercely. "And you—!" She whirled on her brother. "A fine *hermano* you are!

To let this—this—" Tears of fury rolled down her cheecks.

DON ROBERTO sat up. It was no longer amusing. He realized how she must feel, trapped into an admission of love before a roomful of men. And no doubt she had spoken without meaning what she had said. A woman's emotional outburst.

"I'm sorry, Señorita Carmela," he said formally. "But you took me by surprise. My pretending to be dead was not for your benefit, but a necessary precaution—until Enrique could check the house. The mistake was yours, not mine."

It was more of a polite accusation than an apology. But then his ego was still smarting under the things she had called him, not to mention his burning cheeks.

He could not know the long hours of waiting, the prayers, the heartbreak she had undergone. Or the nature of the emotional breakdown at seeing him dead. Otherwise, he would have understood her anger now. But then he was a man, and there were facets of a woman's nature that not even a Don Roberto could fathom.

The color rose in her face. Her anger faded, but he knew that things would never be quite the same between them.

"The fault was mine, Don Roberto," she said quietly. "I am an emotional fool, and I apologize. And when a woman is upset, one must not believe the things she says."

Enrique saved her further embarrassment. "It was simply a misunderstanding, *hermana mia,*" he said quickly "I perhaps should have told you last night. But I was not sure the plan would work. I did not want to build up false hopes."

She swung on her brother. "What plan?" she asked. "Maybe you'd better explain. I don't like to be made the fool."

Still resentful, Don Roberto turned her anger away from her brother. "There is nothing to explain," he said. "As the office in command of the firing squad, Enrique substituted blank ammunition in his soldiers rifles. When the guns cracked, I fell obligingly forward on my face and justice was served. Then Enrique brings the body of his friend back to its ancestral home. That is all."

"That is *all!*" The girl caught her breath. Her face was pale. "Do you realize what will happen if the *gobernador* finds out you are alive? He will have Enrique shot, along with you. You and your oil schemes with Americanos! If it hadn't been—"

"I know." Don Roberto nodded grimly. "But then if that dog, Riega, hadn't lied, the *gobernador* could have done nothing. When I find him—"

"Forget Riega," Enrique said. "It's only a question of who kills him first—the *Dons,* the *caballeros* or one of those broken-hearted *señoritas.*"

The *capitan* suddenly looked as if he had bitten his tongue. And Roberto as though he could cheerfully have torn it out by the roots. Carmela gave them both a withering glance.

"Don't look so guilty, *hermano mio,*" she said. "Don Roberto's affairs with women are well known, and of no interest to me. But that you have involved the Diaz in treason is. I not only stand to lose a brother, but our hacienda as well."

There was a devisive air about her now. But Don Roberto could see that she was worried.

"What about your soldiers?" she said. "Can they be trusted?"

Enrique shrugged. "They know nothing. I changed the shells myself."

"And Roberto's friends who brought him here?" Carmela pressed. "Suppose they talk?"

ENRIQUE turned, embarrassed, toward his hidalgo helpers on the trip. And breathed a sigh of relief. They had evidently made a discreet exit when Carmela had loosened her fury.

"Do you think *they* want to die?" Don Roberto remarked dryly. "For helping a condemned man escape? Look, I am dead. And until the proper time for my resurrection, I'll remain dead. So you can stop worrying about Enrique. Or is it—" the devil in him slipped out— "is it *me* you're thinking of?"

Her dark eyes swung slowly on him. For a full minute, she searched his face with a breathless intensity. A slow flush stained the ivory of her breasts and spread upward to her cheeks.

"Santa Maria!" she said softly. "I wish I knew!" and fled from the room.

Don Roberto stared after her, open-mouthed. He had fully expected her temper to flare up again. Instead— His heart was not behaving in a normal manner.

"Dios!" Enrique said, bewildered. "What is there about you that does these things to women? Even my own *hermana!"* Suddenly, he grinned. *"Por supuesto!* What was it you said in the carriage? Darling, colorful, romantic—"

"There is a time," Don Roberto said shortly. "When things are not amusing. You understand?"

Enrique shrugged hopelessly. He'd never understand this Roberto who lived with such a zest. And yet who could be very serious on occasion. Who, despite his escapades, was a natural leader of men, and without whom, the hidalgos would long ago have been crushed.

Abruptly, Don Roberto switched to business. He explained the cigarette paper message to the Americano, Sanders. Whether Sanders had caught on, he didn't know. Or if he had, whether he would still talk terms after what had happened. They would know in the next few hours.

Enrique frowned. "It would be dangerous to go ahead with that plan now," he said. "Riega would suspect something. And it wouldn't take him long to figure out the truth."

Slowly Don Roberto built a cigarette and lit it in silence. He smiled grimly at his friend.

"Perhaps," he admitted. "But to suspect is one thing, to prove is another. Besides, many things can happen in the next few days. Meanwhile, if Señor Sanders does not show up tonight, then tomorrow I'll slip into Manteca and see him."

"Show yourself in Manteca!" Enrique stared at him. "Are you crazy? You'd not only be risking your own life, but a dozen others besides!"

"I'm not forgetting the others," Don Roberto said calmly. "But I've got to see Sanders. With that money and royalties later—it's our only chance, amigo. Let's face facts."

"I am facing facts," Enrique said. "If you ride into Manteca—" He gave it up. "You will promise, no trouble?"

"Por supuesto," Don Roberto said, and hoped that it would be so. "Besides, if Señor Trask turns up tonight, it won't be necessary. Meanwhile, my funeral will take place tomorrow. Until then, you and Carmela will stay here. *Si?"*

"Si." The *capitan* regarded him with somber eyes. "You lead us down strange paths, Roberto *mio!"*

"But a path that leads to victory," Don Roberto retorted. "Not to *defeat!"*

CHAPTER THREE

A Mongrel Dog Dies

THE PEON squatted indolently in the shade before La Golondrina Cantina. His dark eyes, peering from beneath his sombrero, swept the length of dusty street.

This was the siesta hour.

Save for the horses standing hip-shot before the cantina, Manteca was deserted. And conspiciously absent from the hitch-rack were the blooded stallions of the hidalgos. Evidently, they had returned to their respective haciendas to await the

Gobernador Armandez's next move.

Don Roberto shifted uncomfortably. The sun was hot, and as yet he had seen no sign of Señor Trask. The gringo had not turned up the night before. It might be that he had failed to pick up that cigarette paper. Or, figuring further negotiations dangerous, had chosen to ignore it.

Perhaps he had even left Manteca. If not, he had to be contacted, and persuaded to go ahead with the deal.

Remembering his promise to Enrique, Don Roberto sighed and settled back in the scant shade. As soon as the siesta was over, he would hunt up Señor Trask. And yet, for some reason, he was beginning to distrust the gringo.

As a matter of fact, he no longer trusted himself. He had a premonition of impending trouble. Of an unforeseen disaster that might destroy every hidalgo in Sonora. Somehow, he wished that he had heeded Enrique's warning and stayed away from Manteca. Now it was too late.

He buried his face in his serape and slept.

At five o'clock, the peon stirred, rose and shuffled into La Golondrina. The siesta hour was over and the long bar already crowded. Deferentially, the peon retreated to the far end of the bar. A few curious glances were thrown in his direction for La Golondrina was not often frequented by peons.

However, he aroused no suspicions. With his soiled clothing, battered sombrero, faded serape and worn zapatos, he looked no different from a thousand others of his kind.

Ordering a cheap tequila, he drank slowly, his black eyes studying the crowd, sensing its somber restraint. Men laughed but little, wondering uneasily what the night might bring.

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Suddenly Don Roberto tensed, his tequila forgotten. In searching for the gringo, Trask, his eyes had caught sight of a solitary figure seated at a table but a few feet away. And he knew now that his luck had run out.

Next to the *gobernador* or Felipe Riega, Don Luis Vallajo was the last man in the world he wanted to see just now. For ever since they were boys, he and Don Luis had hated one another. It had been an instinctive hate, born of rivalry. And it had grown with the years. Now, of all times—*Dios!*

Studying Vallejo from beneath the sombrero, Don Roberto's lips curled. He had no use for this mongrel son of an hidalgo father and an Indian mother. Not because he was the result of a moment's bestial passion, but because he embodied all the degenerative characteristics of both parents.

Treacherous, brutal, he was held in contempt by every hidalgo in Sonora. He was an outcast among his own kind. Nor did the caballeros or vaqueros want anything to do with him.

A TALL, powerfully built man, his Indian love of color showed in his sky-blue bolero and pantalones heavily ornamented with braid and hammered silver. His pure white conquistador's hat was shoved away from coarse black hair. Even the gun belt around his waist glittered with chipped stones and silver.

But it was his face that betrayed his birth—coarse, heavy, with a thinly concealed cruelty to the thick lips. More Indian than Spanish, it revealed the arrogance of the hidalgo and the cunning of his mother's people.

What impulse had led Don Jaime Vallejo to acknowledge this mongrel child no one knew, or why he had made him heir to his vast estates. But he had. And after the old Don's death, Luis Vallejo's unbridled nature had come to the surface.

Now, Don Luis was celebrating his enemy's execution the day before. There was a bottle of *aguardiente* in front of him. The bottle was three-fourths empty. As he swung angrily toward the bar to shout for more, his eyes met the peon's.

Denied the respect of equals, he took advantage of every opportunity to strike at those beneath him. The peon offered a chance to exhibit his superiority. Glowering, he shoved back his chair and rose. His path was erratic, his face flushed. Just short of Don Roberto he halted.

"Get out, *cabron!*" he shouted. "La Golondrina is not for animals! Go back to your mescal and your stinking goats! *Andarle!*"

The peon drew himself erect with a quiet dignity. "A *peon, si,* Excellency," he said. "But not a *cabron.* For Don Roberto called me friend. Would you take from me the sad duty of drinking to him now?"

Noise died away. Men shook their heads. Sober, Don Luis was bad enough. Drunk, he was dangerous. Several vaqueros fingered their guns. There was no harm in the peon drinking here. And that he drank to Don Roberto—

"You insolent dog!" The quirt in Don Luis' hand slashed viciously at the peon. Only the sombrero and the draped serape saved Don Roberto's face from being laid open.

"Your Don Roberto was a traitor!" The hidalgo jeered. "A *cabron* like yourself! And where is he now? Lying with—"

His voice twanged off like a broken guitar string. He was staring at the peon with suddenly still eyes. He licked his dry lips.

Fighting down his anger, Don Roberto said, "Since I am but an ignorant peon, perhaps Your Excellency will tell me."

The silence vibrated now. A peon could not talk back to an hidalgo and live long. Yet Don Luis was smiling now.

"*Si*, I could," he said. "But instead, I think I will tell the *gobernador*. He will like to know that the dead has risen!"

His knees buckled as Don Roberto smashed a savage hook to his jaw. Cursing, he staggered back, his hand darting for his gun. A vicious one-two to the chin and heart knocked him to his knees. His mind was so dazed he forgot to draw. Or perhaps, knowing who he was fighting, he had better sense.

Instinctively he staggered to his feet. He was no fighter with his fists. He preferred the knife or the gun—from behind. Yet with half of Manteca looking on, he had to fight.

He might as well have tried to battle the wind. For that was all his blows struck, thin air. Weaving in, fading back, Don Roberto cut him to pieces. And had it not been for the fact that a gun-carrying peon would have aroused immediate suspicion, Don Luis would have died quickly.

Within two minutes, the hidalgo was reeling drunkenly, while caballeros and vaqueros stood by in stunned silence. A peon beating a Don of Spain with his bare fists. *Oye!*

Suddenly, Don Luis went down. Without a word, the peon jerked him to his feet and sent him plunging head-long through the swinging doors. Then the peon shuffled quietly back to his drink, and the unbelieving, paralyzed silence still held.

Near a side door, a man slipped outside. Noting the movement, Don Roberto cursed silently. In a few minutes, *Coronel* Riega would know that a peon had beaten an hidalgo. Would Riega guess that the peon was other than just that?

And what about Don Luis? There was no doubt that Luis had recognized him. *Por Dios!* He should have killed him, and taken his chances later.

If Riega found out he was alive, he would be quietly tracked down and killed. The *coronel* would have no choice. For if word ever reached the *gobernador* that his aide had let himself be tricked by a faked execution—*Adios*, Riega!

Don Roberto was debating whether he might still be able to quiet Luis Vallejo when his tequila glass was magically filled. He looked up at the bartender.

"But, no, señor. I am but a poor peon and—"

"It is for *gracias*," the man said. "We drink to Don Roberto who was our friend."

Glasses went up throughout La Golondrina.

"To Roberto! *Salud!*"

Despite his danger, Don Roberto drank to his own health with gusto. It was a comforting thought that he held these men's loyalty. He might need their guns very soon.

"*Salud!*" he said humbly, and then padded outside.

Behind him, men stared at one another in silence. They could not accept what they had seen. A peon—!

DUSK had fallen and a cool breeze was sweeping the street. Here and there light flickered feebly through a window, driving the shadows back a few feet. On either side, the dobes crouched like squatty beasts. The black slashes that separated them seemed filled with unseen menace. Even the silence was not right.

From somewhere a man's voice—accompanied by a guitar—lifted in a plaintive long song. A dog barked in the distance, a *niño* wailed. Yet it was as though an invisible maw swallowed these sounds and left only the silence—brooding, waiting.

Don Roberto frowned. It was all wrong. Something was up. He wondered about the man who had slipped out of the Golondrina. Had Riega guessed the truth and laid a trap for him?

Instinctively he veered away from a

darkened alley. The street might be—

Instead of finding his back, the knife ripped harmlessly through his bolero. Yet even as he spun, the killer swung again. There was no time for a gun. Desperately, Don Roberto flung his serape into the blurred face, and grabbed the upraised arm.

They fought in silence, their breath coming in heaving gusts. Once Don Roberto tried to reach for his gun, and the blade almost found his throat. After that, it was hold on—with superior strength beginning to tell.

Sooner or later, he knew, the knife would reach him, unless he took the offense. Suddenly, he shoved his assailant away, and then snapped him violently back again. As the man stumbled forward, off balance, he twisted the man's wrist inward. There was a little gasp as the blade sank deeply home, and then the killer slid to the ground.

For a moment, Don Roberto stood drawing air into his heaving lungs. He was trembling with exertion. Death had come very close to him—too close.

Dropping to his knees, he fumbled for a match and struck it. The tiny orange flame laid a weird pattern across the dead man's face. The front of the sky blue bolero and white silk shirt were crimson. The knife hilt protruded from the chest. The dead eyes glared up into the light, unseeing.

Don Luis Vallejo had died as treacherously as he had lived. Half crazed because of his humiliation in La Golondrina, he had tried to slip a knife into Don Roberto's back. Instead, the knife had found his own heart.

The match sputtered out. Don Roberto rose and slipped out into the street. Full black night lay over the town now, with here and there a feeble light dissolving the shadows.

He stood there a moment, listening. The voice, accompanied by the guitar, was singing *La Paloma.* There was the faint clink of glasses and the muted sound of laughter from the *cantinas* along the street. The *niño* was still wailing. In the distance, the dog barked furiously.

Life, unseen, pulsed strongly around him, would have continued to do so had he died—would flow on, uninterrupted, when he was gone.

Slowly, he made his way to his horse, mounted and swung out of town. And with him rode a sense of the unimportance of all things—save the good *Dios* who ruled over them.

Somehow, for the moment, he, the *gobernador,* Riega, the gringo Trask, and others like them who fought and schemed and murdered for things which had no real meaning, lost all signifigance. Theirs were but tiny, mewling voices in a Universe that neither heard nor cared about their petty struggles.

Whether Roberto lived or died was important only to him. The scheming and the killing would go on, and he would continue as an inseparable part of it until in the end, he too died. But then that was life—rich, savage, primordial.

And nothing would ever change him. He knew now. For he was swept along by an impersonal force, a way of living that was strictly his own, and over which he had no control. Nor would he have changed it for a life less exciting.

Drawing in the crisp night air, he exhaled strongly. The tempo of events was moving dangerously fast. Right now, he was the match to the powder keg. Not only was his own life in danger, but those of all his friends.

But the blood still surged through his veins. And while it did, Gobernador Armandez and one Coronel Felipe Riega could never be sure that their own might not one day stain the *palacio* steps.

Touching spurs to the stallion, he headed rapidly for La Hacienda del Oro. Tonight there was much to be done, plans

to be made, moves to be figured out.

Mañana? Quien sabe? Mañana was another day!

CHAPTER FOUR

For a Million in Oil

LA HACIENDA DEL ORO crouched silently in the night as Don Roberto dismounted in the courtyard. He had skirted the peon's quarters and outlying buildings. He did not wish even his own people to know that he was alive.

A light burned on the second floor of the *casa grande.* The lower part was dark. Which meant that the servants had returned to their quarters. *Bueno.*

Crossing the veranda, he found the door locked. He swore, knocked lightly.

"Si?" Carmela queried softly from above. *"Quien es?"*

Don Roberto looked up. She was outlined against the dim glow from within and her skin was like warm old ivory.

"Roberto!" he said. "The door is locked."

"Un momento!" A minute later, he heard her footsteps in the hallway. Then she was standing, a lovely ivory goddess, in the open doorway.

Ignoring the wild pounding of his heart, Don Roberto led her quickly back inside.

"Where's Enrique?" he said. "It's important."

"What is it?" She was suddenly anxious. "What happened?"

Dropping into a chair, Don Roberto shrugged. "Perhaps nothing," he said. "Perhaps the gobernodar or Riego knows that I am alive."

"Oh, no!" Carmela put a hand to her mouth. Her eyes widened. Then she had herself under control. "I'll get Enrique." Then as she turned to go, she saw his hands.

"Roberto!" She was on her knees beside him. "The blood! You're hurt!"

Santa Maria! He'd forgotten to wipe his hands back there in the alley.

"'Sta nada," he said, correcting the oversight hastily. He hesitated, then decided the truth was best. "It was Don Luis Vallejo. I had to kill him."

She caught her breath, and rose.

"You promised there would be no trouble!" she said. "And right away, a killing! *Por la madre de Dios!* You would start a fight in a monastary! Sit there until I find Enrique!"

Women! Don Roberto stared after her resentfully. Could they not understand that man was made to love and drink and fight? Without those diversions—*Oye!* One was better dead!

Enrich Diaz was frowning when he returned with Carmela a moment later. His sister had told him the news.

"So Don Luis dug up the corpse," he said. "Did he have a chance to talk to anyone?"

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Don Roberto shrugged. "I don't know. He had the time. Anyway, we can't take chances. If the *gobernador* knows, he'll have half the army out here for me. Or if it's Riega, it will be a knife or a bullet from ambush."

Enrique swore softly. "I told you to stay away from Manteca," he said. "Even if you'd seen this gringo Trask, he's not fool enough to oppose the *gobernador* now, with no protection from us. Now the others will have to be warned."

"The *gobernador* can't afford to act merely on suspicion," Don Roberto reminded him. "With the Dons already stirred up, he might start something he couldn't finish. No. He'll have to prove I'm alive first. He'll have trouble doing that. Remember the old vaquero line cabin near Los Dos Piños? I'm riding there tonight, now. When things have died down, I'll slip back."

"*Si.*" Enrique's voice was bitter. "And who is to fight Governor Armandez meanwhile?"

"*Por Dios!*" Don Roberto came to his feet angrily. "How long do you think I intend to stay dead? Until Armandez dies? You are the child, Enrique! I have other plans."

"For creating more trouble?" Carmela retorted. "Haven't you caused enough already?"

DON ROBERTO ignored her. The idea had been circulating in the back of his mind since his arrest. He lit a cigarette and leaned back in his chair. He probed Enrique's face in silence.

"What would you do, *mi capitan,*" he asked calmly, "if you were in my place? Would you hide out in fear and disgrace for the rest of your life, knowing that you had failed your friends when they needed you? Or would you do something about it? Or would you become what you were accused of being—a *revolutionisto?*"

Ignoring Enrique's startled expression, he went on with an eager intensity. "Look. Gobernador Armandez is out to destroy the hidalgos. We know that. And since my execution, every Don in the country is wondering who will be next."

"But a revolution!" Enrique licked his lips. "How—?"

"The time is ripe for it!" Don Roberto said quickly. "The Dons are desperate. Once they learn I'm alive, they'll rise up en masse!"

His confidence was contagious. "It might succeed at that," Enrique said. "A surprise coup at the palacio—*Si!*"

"How many army officers can you count on?" Don Roberto asked. "Have you enough?"

Enrique thought a moment. "At least half of them," he said. "With the rest divided between the *gobernador* and Riega."

"*Bueno!*" Don Roberto paced back and forth with quick strides. He had known for some time that a revolution was the only solution. Not only for him, but for all the hidalgos. Protesting against the growing number of decrees that were robbing them of their power did no good. There was only way to fight a dictatorship—with force.

Suddenly, he whirled on Enrique. "Can I count on you, *mi capitan?*"

"What else?" Enrique smiled grimly. "You've already plunged us down a road of no return. Tomorrow, the *gobernador* may have me shot for planning your escape. *Si.* Count me in."

Always adventurous, always daring, a champion, paradoxically, both of the hidalgos and those who sweated under their tyranny, Don Roberto was but little concerned with tomorrow. Already, he was planning for the day after tomorrow.

"Are you mad?" Carmela spun him around. Her eyes were blazing. "Haven't you caused enough trouble, without plunging the Dons into a *revolucion* that

will destroy us all? And you, Enrique!" She flared. "Are you the fool to agree to this madness?"

"In madness," Don Roberto reminded her, "there is often reason."

"*Sí*" she retorted. "But insanity is always insanity! Before I let you destroy my brother, I'll—I'll—"

She stomped her foot in helpless anger. And, watching her, Don Roberto grinned.

"Anger only makes you more beautiful, *novia mia,*" he observed. "But it does no good."

"*Novia!*" The fury in her eyes fanned to an open flame. "I, Carmela Helena Catalina Diaz y Cortez, your *novia!* Why, you conceited Don Juan—you with your *cantina courtesana* conquests! Rather would I become engaged to a peon!"

IN THE FACE of her anger, Don Roberto retreated hastily back to business.

"Make your plans for day after tomorrow," he told Enrique. "We'll strike during the siesta hour. Meanwhile, I'll hide out at the vaquero's cabin. Meet me there tomorrow night. If Riega or the *gobernador* turns up here, you know nothing. I was buried this afternoon. Now, I'm on my way to—"

"Going somewhere, Don Roberto?" Startled, the three of them swung toward the voice, and froze motionless.

The gringo Trask stood in the doorway, covering them with a .45. He had come in so quietly they had had no warning.

Don Roberto looked at the gun, and his face hardened. He didn't like guns pointed at him, especially when he didn't know the reason.

"You slip into my house, Señor Trask," he said, "with a gun in your hand. Is that simply an Americano custom?"

Trask laughed softly. "You're a cool one, Don Roberto," he said. "You even put on a good show before that firing squad. Fooled me, until I saw you beat hell out of Vallejo in La Golondrina. A peon don't jump an hidalgo, amigo. Nor do they know how to use their fists that way. I just put two and two together, and up you came."

So Trask hadn't picked up that message, Don Roberto thought. The gringo, too, had believed him dead.

"Keep your hand away from that gun." Trask arced the .45 toward Enrique. "Or you'll get a slug through your belly."

"Shoot my brother, gringo," Carmela spat, "and you'll never leave Sonora alive."

"A spit-fire, eh?" Trask's eyes flicked toward her. "Take it easy. No one's going to get hurt, if you all behave."

Don Roberto studied Trask with narrowed eyes. Had the gringo told Gobernador Armandez the truth, and been sent here to kill him? Or was trask playing some deep game of his own? Surely he wasn't fool enough to ruin his chances with the Dons.

"Just what is the game you play, señor?"

Trask's eyes glittened. "The Sonoran oil rights, free," he said. "For your delivery alive to the *gobernador.*"

"Alive!" Don Roberto stared at him, incredulous. "*Por Dios,* are you crazy! There's only one way the *gobernador* wants me. Dead."

"You damn fool!" Trask sneered. "You still think you were framed for trying to play ball with me? Look, amigo, you were framed by Riega for one purpose—to stir up the Dons against Gobernador Armandez.

"Ever since Armandez took over the government, it's been this guy, Riega, who's run the show, and Armandez who's reaped the profits. But Riega doesn't like playing second fiddle. He's money-mad and power-hungry. For months now, he's been scheming to overthrow Armandez.

"The *gobernador* knows it, and is scared stiff. But he's afraid to try and railroad Riega. Doesn't know just how strong the *Coronel* might be with the Army. So he's sweated it out, hoping Riega would slip and he could have him shot."

So Riega had used him as a pawn against the *gobernador.* Don Roberto swore silently, and anger rose up in him. Yet he kept it under control and waited for the gringo to continue.

TRASK shifted his weight but did not lower the gun.

"Riega's no fool. He wasn't sure he could swing his little revolution just yet. So he sweat it out, too, until this oil business gave him an idea. Then he went to work.

"He played up the oil angle strong. Pointed out to the *gobernador* that you were defying his authority. That you were robbing him of a fortune. And, worse, that you planned to use the oil money to stage a first-class revolution. Armandez fell for it.

"From there on, you didn't have a chance. With Riega the prosecutor and chief witness and Gobernador Armandez the judge and jury—bang!—you ended up against a 'dobe wall. That put the *gobernador* on the spot. Or so Riega thinks." Trask's smile was mirthless.

"Tomorrow, he plans to spread the rumor that Armandez forced him to lie at your trial. And that more hidalgos are due to go the same way. Then with the Dons in revolt, he figures it will be easy for his coup to succeed. There's only one thing wrong—Armandez knows you're alive and Riega doesn't. Now. You begin to understand?"

Si, Don Roberto thought bitterly. He was beginning to understand what a blind fool he'd been. For months, he'd had an opportunity to play his two most dangerous enemies against one another, and he hadn't realized it! How the gringo had found out these things he didn't know. But he had. Now the pattern was clear. Very clear.

Realizing that Riega had trapped him, the *gobernador* had quickly sensed how to turn the tables. For with Don Roberto alive, the *gobernador* could charge Riega with framing an hidalgo to foment revolution. That would mean a firing squad for Riega.

Furthermore, aware that all Sonora was now a potential powder-keg, Armandez would attempt to placate the Dons. He would probably grant Don Roberto a full pardon, an official apology, and perhaps a land grant to soothe the Aguierra honor.

Justice, fair and impartial, under the rule of the benevolent *gobernador,* General Perdo Armandez! *Si,* while behind the scenes, he would continue weakening the Dons with more official decrees. And exorbitant taxation of the proposed oil field revenue.

What a beautiful counter-plot, Don Roberto thought—with Riega caught in the net of his own treachery.

He studied Trask with narrowed eyes. "Why didn't you go to Riega, instead of the *gobernador?"*

The gringo shrugged. "Riega framed you. If he'd gained control of the government, he'd have double-crossed me. Demanded a cool five million for the drilling rights, and a hell of a big royalty later. This way, I can get them for nothing."

"Nothing!" Carmela exclaimed. Her face was white. "I suppose you don't realize the *gobernador* will have my brother shot for planning Don Roberto's escape?"

"That's up to Armandez," the gringo retorted. His mouth was harsh, ruthless in the lamp light. The .45 came up. His eyes were cold, watchful. "All right, let's get going."

BEHIND him in the hallway, a tall figure moved forward. Watching, Don Roberto tensed, recognizing Coronel Felipe Riega.

Riega thrust a gun in the gringo's back and said:

"You are clever, Señor Trask. Too clever for your good."

The gringo kept his eyes fixed desperately on the two men in front of him. He knew better than to move.

"Riega!" he gasped hoarsely. "How did you—?"

"You are surprised, *señor?*" Riega taunted. "You knew everything, didn't you, except that Don Luis Vallejo talked! Such a small mistake, to be a fatal one."

A thin film of sweat glistened on the gringo's face. He licked his lips. His knuckles whitened on the .45. He was trying to make up his mind to spin.

Behind Riega's outward calm was a smouldering anger. Don Roberto sensed that the *coronel* was holding himself in check with difficulty. Riega hated gringos, even good ones. And Trask was not a good one.

"When I learned that you had gone to the *gobernador* with the news of Don Roberto," continued Riega, "I knew what would happen to me. So, I disposed of Gobernador Armandez."

Somehow, after what Trask had told him, the news did not surprise Don Roberto.

"So Armandez is dead," he said. "And you're in charge of the government. We go from bad to worse."

Riega's black eyes glittered. His thin lips were cruel, arrogant. Already, the tyrant was showing in him.

"I *am* the government," he retorted. "And soon your hidalgo friends will become painfully aware of that fact. Within six months, the last of them will be thrown out of Sonora."

"If you live that long," Don Roberto said calmly. Yet he wasn't kidding himself. With General Armandez alive, they might have lived through this thing. But with Riega, no chance.

The *coronel* would boast for another minute or two. Then he would start shooting. Only in that split second before he could swing his gun away from Trask would they— His eyes flicked to Enrique. The *capitan* nodded. Don Roberto settled on his toes, waiting.

And then even that last hope was gone. Half a dozen army officers suddenly appeared behind Riega.

The *coronel* smiled, reading Don Roberto's mind. "I am not the fool, Roberto *mio,*" he said, mockingly. Then the smile was gone, and the smouldering resentment of years surged to the surface.

"Do you think I'd leave anything to chance now?" he said harshly. "Ever since we were *niños,* I've planned for this moment. I've never been good enough for you and your kind. The hidalgos, sons of Spanish grandees. With the haciendas and their cold, proud women and their peon slaves."

His black eyes burned into Don Roberto's with a mounting fury. The pent-up hate of many long years was leaping forth.

"And where will the hidalgos be a few months from now?" he jerked. "Destroyed, and their women and their haciendas along with them. Those that I don't choose to keep for myself. But you won't live long enough to grieve for them, Roberto *mio.* None of you here in this room will."

"Not even this gringo, Trask." There was an added viciousness in his words. "He's a cheap swindler. I checked on him in his own country. He's a—what do you call it, gringo?—a checker-board artist. A crook who gains land grants, sinks a well or two, announces a new field, and sells worthless oil land to fools who know nothing about oil. Also, a killer. Wanted for murder."

WITH a strangled oath, Trask spun, his Colt swinging in a short, wicked arc.

Riega fired twice, the shots blending, and Trask doubled over, clutching his belly. His gun went off. A bullet ploughed into the floor. As he dropped, Riega put a bullet through his head.

With that first shot, Don Roberto leaped aside, grabbing for his gun. Fanning away in the opposite direction, Enrique followed suit.

With Riega blocking the doorway, his officers could not fire. Even as he spun, Riega realized his mistake. But it was too late. Bullets were already reaching out for him. Eyes blazing, he returned lead for lead.

A slug caught Don Roberto in the thigh, dropping him. Across the room, Enrique was firing steadily. His own Colt slapped back three times against his palm, and two neat holes popped up in front of the Riega tunic.

For a second, Riega stood there, incredulous. As though he could not believe that he, *Coronel* Felipe Riega, was dying in his hour of triumph. Automatically, he raised his pistol.

Don Roberto put a bullet squarely between the hate-filled eyes. Felipe Riega pitched forward on his face and lay very still.

With their *coronel* down, his officers opened fire. Had they been common *soldados,* they would have fled. But these were hot-blooded young officers, friends of Riega's.

Now they wanted revenge.

From the floor, Don Roberto stopped one with a bullet through the throat. Another, leaping forward to help his companion, went down under Enrique's gun. A third was caught in a murderous crossfire.

Suddenly, Don Roberto heard Enrique swear softly and knew the *capitan* had been hit. But his gun still kept blazing away. The air was reeking of smoke and burned cordite.

From somewhere came the loud drumming of hard-ridden horses. Then men were shouting, and there was a sudden crash of guns in the hallway. After that, there was a silence that hurt the ear drums.

And then hidalgos were pouring into the room and Don Roberto heard Carmela crying.

"Enrique! *Hermano mio!* Are you all right?"

And Enrique was replying, *"Si! 'Sta nada!"*

Suddenly, men were all around him, ripping away his pantalones leg to check his wound.

Manuel Ortiz, an old friend, said, *"Madre de Dios,* Roberto! It is the dead come to life! We could not believe it at first. One of Enrique's officers raced to my hacienda with the news after Riega took over. Somehow he found out that you were alive and that Riega was headed here. We rode like mad." Don Manuel still had trouble believing it. *"Santa Pedro!* It is the miracle!"

With his head comfortably cradled in his sister's arm, Enrique grinned over at Don Roberto. "I have only the bullet wound in the chest," he said. "Are you hurt badly, amigo?"

DON ROBERTO glared at him. *"Si!"* he said tragically. "I am dead, you *cabron! Por Dios,* always you have the luck! You stop the bullet in the chest, and *su hermana* nurses you back to health. But me, who nurses me? Probably some fat *señora* with ten or twelve children!"

His hidalgo friends were laughing now, and the tension of pain and battle were gone. Don Roberto scowled unhappily at them.

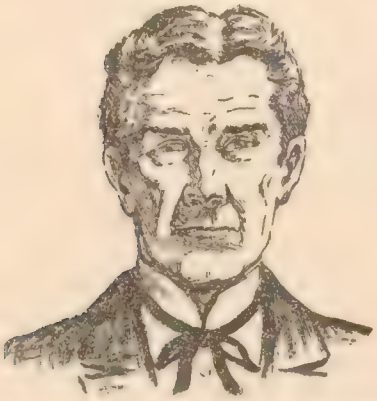
"Worse, already I can hear them say-

(Continued on page 129)

SECOND-STRING HEROES

THEIR SADDLES EMPTY, THEIR GUNS AND LAUGHTER STILLED, BUT THE WEST THEY BUILT LIVES ON.

by **ROBBINS AND WAGGENER**



Maxwell P. Hawthorne

1

The public may think of the reporter as a dashing, daring individual, but to the people of Marion, New Mexico, the life of the newspaperman was just plain dull. They had only to look at Maxwell P. Hawthorne, reporter, editor, makeup man, printer and delivery boy of the *Marion Express*. Hawthorne was a quiet little man who wrote only about church doings and the births of new babies.

2

Hawthorne's biggest thrill was when he ran a special edition announcing the Freeman triplets, John, James and Jessie. He felt that a newspaperman should be above such things as killings. His publication was blind to the crime and gambling that ran rampant in Marion. "After all," he used to say, "who wants to read about blood and bullets while eating breakfast ham and eggs?"

3

The *Express* editor would have continued to live his secluded life if Nick Sculin, saloon keeper and town badman, had been just a little wiser. Sculin intimidated everyone, including the law, and was responsible for most of the killings and all of the gambling in Marion. Now he had a bright idea. He would advertise in the *Express*. Hawthorne took one look at the proposed ad and turned pink. The copy read, "See plump and beautiful dancing girls at the Blue Star Palace!"

4

Hawthorne ordered the gunman out. Sculin grabbed for his gun but the enraged editor knocked it out of his hand with a stick of type. Then Hawthorne brought a bottle of printer's ink down on the gunslick's head. He dragged the unconscious gambler to the local jail. Sculin was given a speedy trial and sentenced to swing. Marion, New Mexico, soon became a law abiding town and its weekly newspaper continued its coverage of peaceful news.

THE HARD TREK

By FARGO BROWN

Sometimes a man has to see fifteen years' hard work blasted down in one split second before he learns the hard, bitter lesson that will mean survival!

THE CALIFORNIA valley shimmered with noon's heat haze as John Hardin pulled his wagon to a stop at the summit. Marta Hardin moved restlessly on the wagonette beside him. John glanced covertly at her.

A terrible, fierce pride held Marta's eyes on the grandeur below. And that same pride kept back tears, John knew. He wanted to put an arm about her slender shoulders, but he knew that would not do at the moment. For this was a hard thing to endure, and each must endure it in his own way now.

Fifteen years of planning, building, raising a son—all of it gone now—all but the boy off-riding the wagon there. Uncertainty stretching ahead to devil them as it had that first year in Arizona. The task of rebuilding all over again. A so-called solid foundation crumpled like a house of cards by people.

John glanced back along the trail.

IT ALL began the day John Hardin loped from the lower reaches of the Misty Mountains and rode up to the wagon piled high with household goods and barbed wire.

As he pulled his horse down, he saw the bearded man tug on his reins and set his thick shoulders antagonistically. The man slid something out of the side of his mouth. The heads of a woman and a girl bobbed up from behind a canvas windbreaker and as promptly disappeared. John's brow knitted as the bore of a rifle shoved out under the canvas.

He reined down beside the wagon and said, "Howdy." He put his hands on the saddle horn and rocked a little in the stirrups. That rifle muzzle was a threatening thing peeking out at him. He wanted to make sure no gesture of his would touch it off.

The man in the wagon surveyed Hardin fully, from his spurred boots to the top of his cone-peaked sombrero. He saw a flat muscled man with clear blue eyes and the weather seams of life lining his rugged face—lines of storm and lines of peace.

The man spat bluntly, "Cowman."

Hardin rocked in his stirrups again, seeing that rifle muzzle lift a little. He nodded confirmation of the man's word, saying, "I use most of this valley."

The man's whiskered lips curled derisively. "You do like hell," he said. "I've had trouble with your type before. Burned me out and trampled me and mine down. That's not going to happen again. You don't own none of this valley and nothin' but a few pot-bellied cows and a mud shack. I aim to prove you don't own it by settlin' here. An' there's more like me comin' right behind."

"You're talking mighty high," said

Then he was pulled from the saddle with a violent thrust.

John, eyes narrowing. "Just where do you intend to drive stakes?"

The man's lips pursed shrewdly. "I'll scout around and pick my place."

Hardin swung his hand off toward the range across the valley. "Yonder in the Sawtooths," he said. "Head for them and you can have all the land you want."

"What's over there?" asked the man suspiciously.

"Nothing," said John blandly. "But it's the same thing I started with here."

"So I stay here. What's wrong with that?"

"Trouble—from me."

The bearded man was silent for a moment. Then he said slowly, "If it's trouble, friend, we might as well have it now. Shoot, Jane!"

There was a sharp click as the hammer of the rifle went back behind the canvas cover.

With the speed of a draw, John lunged sideways in his saddle and got the gun muzzle in his hand. Even as he pulled violently, the barrel spit fire, the bullet grazing his shirt, powder burning his hand. A sharp, piercing scream followed the firing of the gun as he pulled it away. With a light oath, John flung the weapon into the brush.

THEN he was falling from his horse, born to the ground by the snarling dive of the bearded man. He hit the earth with the nester atop him. The wind was driven from his lungs by the impact.

Fingers gouged into his neck and knees were battering at his groin as he rolled violently and freed himself. He leaped to his feet, the breath sawing heavily from his lungs. The nester ducked his head and rushed. John leaned into that charge and got the man by the arms. He spun him with a full nelson and then rammed the man's head into the wheel of his wagon. John let the limp body sag to the ground.

Dully, sickened a little by this unwanted action, he turned to his horse and swung up. He barely heard the screamed imprecations of the woman in the wagon as she held her moaning daughter to her. Head down, John rode away.

And his thoughts were dark as he took the looping road toward his Circle H ranch house. Less than fifteen minutes ago he had gazed with pride and accomplishment on a herd that would, in one month, free him of debt and make him solid. Yes, it had been a prideful thing to look upon and at the moment he had shared it secretly with his wife, Marta. For without her he would have been nothing. A drifter, a forty-a-month puncher on someone else's spread.

But as he plodded along now a great shadow seemed to hover about him. He tried to force it away, reserving his opinion of what had happened until he talked to Marta. She was an understanding woman. Yet this new threat to his plans was a tangible thing inside of him and made his blood run hot. For there was the future of his son, Jack, to think of, too.

John loped into the ranch yard and put up his horse. He noticed Jack's pony was gone. The kid had been riding into town a lot lately. Well, he was young and salty, why shouldn't he go to town? John crossed the yard and entered the house.

Marta was there in the cool dimness of the living room, leaning against the kitchen door. There was a smudge of flour on one rosy cheek, but she was crisp and fresh in crinkly gingham. John had his moment's wonder of her. For since he had first captured her heart in Kentucky and brought her to this unrelenting land, she had always been crisp as fresh celery at the close of each day.

She said, across the room to him, "What troubles you, John?"

And at this, too, he had his time of wondering. For from the very moment they were married, she had shown this startling ability to read his every emotion, even as she was reading him across this dim-lit room now.

"Why, Marta?" he said heavily.

"The cattle are all right," she said in her soft way. "Whom did you see, John?"

She was uncanny. He moved across the room and sunk into his rocker there before the fire place. "I really don't know," he rumbled.

MARTA took the chair across from him, folding her hands in her lap. She let the silence run, waiting for her man to speak.

John said slowly, "There was a wagon, a bearded man, his women. It was piled with household things and barbed wire."

"That's how we came in," said Marta patiently.

"Not with barbed wire," reproached John.

She was silent, motionless at the rebuke.

"They would have killed me, Marta." Then he looked up from under his shaggy brows at her, marveling at her calm composure. He remembered when the steer had gored him, and the quick, efficient way she had cared for him, taking such things in her stride with her own fierce pride in her ability.

"Why, John?" she asked.

"They said they would take whichever part of this land they wanted. I told them there could be trouble in that. They chose to make that trouble then and there."

After a moment's silence, Marta said, "The land's big. There's room for all."

"Not," said John, "in the middle of what we have built."

Marta rose from her chair. John noticed she did so slowly, as if thoughtful of something she foresaw in the future. Marta had a way of predicting things. And he too read her well enough to know whether she saw a happy or sorrowful ending in things to come.

There had been that time when she had predicted the winter which had wiped them out, made them start things all over again. She had that strange pensiveness about her now.

She said, "I do hope Jack returns shortly. Supper is almost ready." Then she returned to the kitchen.

John sat there in the gloom, looking down at the gnarled hands in his lap. He looked back down the years, remembering all the hardships and heartaches. But there had been compensations even then. There had always been Marta, then little Jack, and he was reaching out to become solid. But a few more like that bearded one, the wagon, the barbed wire. Those things were deeply disturbing.

There was the quick run of hoofs in the yard.

John raised his head as Jack came up the steps and stomped into the room. There was great pride in his eyes as his son stood boldly limned against the light outside, but he frowned as the youngster slid his eyes past him and went into the kitchen without a word.

John heaved himself heavily from his chair and followed the boy. Jack was there at the wash basin, whooshing his face. Marta was at the stove, shoving back a lock of her hair as she looked at the boy. She fixed John with a questioning look

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and he knew the boy had not spoken to his mother. He leaned back against the cupboard.

WHEN Jack was done, he dried his face and hands and turned from the kitchen without looking at either one of them. John's voice caught him at the door. "You act like Mother and I are in the wrong house, son. What's up?"

Jack squared himself away toward his father. The sharpness of his young face was tightly drawn. "You know what's up," he said hotly.

"I haven't put any burrs under your saddle blanket lately," said John, tantalizingly.

"Your humor," charged Jack, "is like the choice of people you fight."

"Jack!" reprimanded Marta sternly.

John silenced her with a wave of his hand. "What do you mean by that, son?" he asked mildly.

Jack's words were rushed, tumbling one over the other: "That girl. You almost pulled her arm out of the socket. Tore her finger half off."

"If I hadn't," interrupted John, patiently, "that finger would have planted me six feet under."

"They were scared," said Jack. "She told me so herself. They've had trouble with cowmen before."

"So," said John, "you're a cowman."

The boy opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came. He turned from the kitchen and stomped into his bedroom.

John looked from under his shaggy brows to Marta. "Remember," he said, "how I was about you? At least the kid knows a woman when he sees one. She would have shot me, because her father told her to. Pretty good judge, that boy."

Marta was staring at the empty kitchen doorway, that pensiveness frown on her flushed face. Without looking at her husband, she turned back to the stove.

John said heavily, "Keep it hot, Marta. I'll get you those staples you've wanted in town."

As he turned from the room, she breathed one fervent prayer. "Be careful, John." And two tears coursed down her cheeks.

John paused at the gun rack there by the door, looked at his holstered pistol for a moment, then went out and down the steps to the corral.

Marta came from the kitchen and looked at that rack, then turned toward her son's room. Wtih a deep sigh of knowledge, she turned back into the kitchen.

TWILIGHT'S last pale threat held as John Hardin loped onto Sweetwater's main street. He pulled his mount to a walk, studying the line of wagons and the people grouped before Phineas Botts' assay office. The slender Botts was haranguing them with gestures, but fell silent as John rode past. The nesters turned and fixed hostile eyes on John, but he ignored them as he continued on down to Saul Ahrens' Mercantile and General Store. He lit down and went in.

Ahrens was there behind the counter working on a tally sheet. He glanced up at John and grunted. John put Marta's list on the counter and said, "Fill it, huh?"

Saul made a final notation on his paper and looked up. "Your bill, here," he said bluntly, "is almost ten dollars, Hardin."

The cold way he said it made John peer at him from under those brows. The usual friendliness was not in Saul's eyes. "It's been," said John, "plenty times more than that."

"Times are changing," said Saul, furtively, under John's level gaze. "This country's going to expand right fast and I'll need more stock to keep up. Can't carry a man too far. Now take them—" He pointed out toward the group of nesters. "They pay cash on the barrel head."

The moment's shock of comparison

touched John off and he reached out and grabbed Saul by the scuff of the shirt, pulling him violently toward him. Saul's eyes went saucer-round and his mouth was a wordless hole in his face.

With a heavy sigh, John flung him back against the shelves, jarring a shower of canned goods down about the merchant. "Fill that order," he barked curtly.

Saul recovered himself and stooped as if to retrieve some of the fallen goods. When he straightened, his hand was gun-filled, his fright gone and he was a snarling little man behind the threat he held.

"You'll not get another damn thing in this store until you pay your bill," he screamed. "I want three head of prime beef for what you owe. Then I'll think about tradin' with you again."

John bent a little toward the man, his face clouded with anger. Saul drew back against that threat and eared the hammer of his gun.

John said, "It's me who's kept you in business, meeting your high prices. I'll break you now, for this."

"You'll break nothin'," sneered Saul. "You're alone, and the nesters know it. All them against you. And there's more on the way. It's you who'll be broken!"

John straightened, his blood pounding hard in his temples. There was a wild desire within him to go against that gun, regardless of the consequences. But there was Marta to think of, and Jack. He turned from the store.

EVENING lights were casting their yellow rectangles on the boardwalk when John swung into his saddle. Deep-seated anger rode him hard. The thought of his being responsible for the very building of this town and the merchant trade was a bitter pill to swallow in this moment in lieu of the threat to his future security. This had to be discussed with Marta. She would have an answer. He reined his mount around.

Lifting his head, he saw the group before Botts' place split up, the men stretching out across the street in a thin line while the women huddled together there on the boardwalk. Botts was nowhere to be seen.

John continued slowly toward them, his head ducked a little so that he looked past his brows. And his anger at their insolence burned him like a brand. His shoulders were squared and straight and he thrust out the contempt all men ahorse have for men afoot.

The man with the square-cut beard was in the line's center and he pointed a finger, shouting, "That's him! That's the jasper who figures he's God around here!"

John rode steadily toward them. Their faces were turned up to him, hostility flowing from their eyes in strong currents to build a tension as strong as a cold wind.

John's horse, seeing the barrier of men before him, stopped. John placed his hands on the saddle horn and rocked a little in his stirrups.

"Step aside," he said heavily.

"Step aside," repeated the bearded man. "High and mighty, ain't he?"

"Step aside," intoned John, "or I'll ride you down."

The bearded man's hand darted toward the horse's cheek strap and John sunk home his spurs. The animal reared and lunged forward, sending two men sprawling away with piercing screams of pain.

But before the horse could free itself, hands were on the reins and men were pulling John from the saddle.

As he came down among them, he kicked out with booted feet, smashing a curse back down a man's throat. Then he was reeling under the blows raining upon him.

He shoved out against that wall of flesh and it gave a little. With a bellow, he ducked his head and butted into them,

flailing his arms like a windmill. This way, he fought from the circle to the boardwalk and got his back to the assay office wall.

Still they came at him from all angles. His knotted fists smashed against shouting, distorted faces and knocked them away, only to have others take their places.

Then their sheer weight of numbers got to him. He sagged wearily before the onslaught. As he was about to go down and be at the mercy of their boots, a bellowing voice raised to still the action.

Marshal Joe Grafton spun men away, saying over and over in a sharp voice, "What's all this? What's all this?"

John reeled against the building wall, his breath sawing from his lungs. He pawed at his skinned face with shredded hands. The man with the beard was saying in a whining way, "He thinks he's big britches around here. Almost tore my daughter's arm off this afternoon and now he rides men down in the street. He's—"

"Shut up!' snapped the lawman. "What you got to say to this, John?"

WITH the pain of battle and the cause of all this still riding his anger hard, John raised his fists once more, growling, "What I got to say, I'll say with these." He lurched forward.

The marshal grabbed John, spun him and shoved him rattlingly against the building wall. "None of that," he barked. "I'll have to run you in."

John faced him squarely. "You, too, huh?"

"I don't know what you mean by that," said the lawman, "but I'm going to have peace in this town. Get on your horse and go home."

John squared his shoulders and walked past the people with great dignity. Catching up his horse there in the street, he swung up and rode slowly out of town.

It was nearly midnight when John entered the ranch yard and put up his horse. As he crossed the yard, he saw Marta there in the porch rocker, the pale starshine outlining her delicately. John came up and sat down on the top step near her.

"They hurt you, John," she said quietly, but there was tension riding her words.

He was slow in answering. "I had to fight," he said simply.

Marta sighed, "Everything is a fight, John."

"But the odds—" he rumbled.

"They're always great."

John hunched his shoulders restlessly. "If it was anything but people. The bearded one is vicious and he's smart enough to strike quick before I can bring in help. He has his own kind with him, and now all the merchants are behind him for the business. Saul Ahrens proved that."

Through the ensuing silence, Marta said profoundly, "The smell of money makes a fickle thing of a man. Come to bed, John."

He rose and followed her into the house, hearing the patter of feet cross Jack's room. The boy had been listening. John wondered just how much effect that pretty girl had had on him to turn him against his own flesh and blood.

In bed, with the blankets pulled tightly against his chin, he stared up at the dark ceiling. This turmoil rode him hard. His experience against the elements were as nothing against this human threat. For the elements at least warned of things to come and attacked with sincerity. These men struck furtively. He fell into a fitful sleep.

THEN he was awakening with a start, feeling Marta awake beside him. He listened, very still, with that instinct which comes to all men who live close to nature. Then, with an oath, he was leaping from the bed and pulling on his clothes. His cattle were on the run.

Their faint bawling and the murmur of flying hoofs sheared through the dawn.

John and Jack hit the gun rack together and grabbed pistols, with John saying, wonderingly, "Why, boy, I thought you were in the other camp."

"Can't a guy make a mistake?" challenged the youngster.

John slapped him heartily on the back and led the run toward the corral.

The noise of the herd grew now and Jack let out an anguished cry, "Skull Canyon!"

The stampede din rose high and then died out. John pulled his horse down and Jack followed suit. Their shoulders were slumped with dejection now. They were too late. For silence meant but one thing—prime Circle H cattle were piled high at the bottom.

Jack swung in his saddle and John heard him utter his first oath. And when John looked back, he swore, too. A thin column of smoke rose from the ranch house.

Savagely, spinning their mounts, they raced back. Thundering into the ranch yard, they saw Marta save the last bit of goods from the house. She had the wagon piled high, and now she stood by the front wheel, staring at the crumpling ruins.

John flung himself from the horse to stand looking at the wreckage. Little Jack tried to speak but no words came.

John turned slowly and looked at the rifle leaning there against the wagon wheel. He went over and felt the barrel. It was hot.

John studied that rifle for a long moment, then he said:

"I'm glad you're a bad shot, Marta, for your own sake. Wiped out. Cattle and house. Now it's kill or be killed."

He stopped and looked from his wife to his son. For a long moment violence wrestled within him, for there was a time when violence was a part of him. But the true thing came through—the best for his family. That was his responsibility.

"Jack," he said heavily, "fetch the team and harness up."

The boy obeyed. When the team was ready, John said quietly, "Marta, allow me to help you up."

He gave her his hand and seated her in the wagon. With great dignity, he put the rifle in the wagon bed and got up on the seat to take the ribbons.

AND THAT was how it happened. Below lay the heat-filled California valley and John turned and clucked to his team, his gaze straight ahead now. The wagon lurched forward, the rolls of barbed wire making a slight rustling sound from the wagon's jounce.

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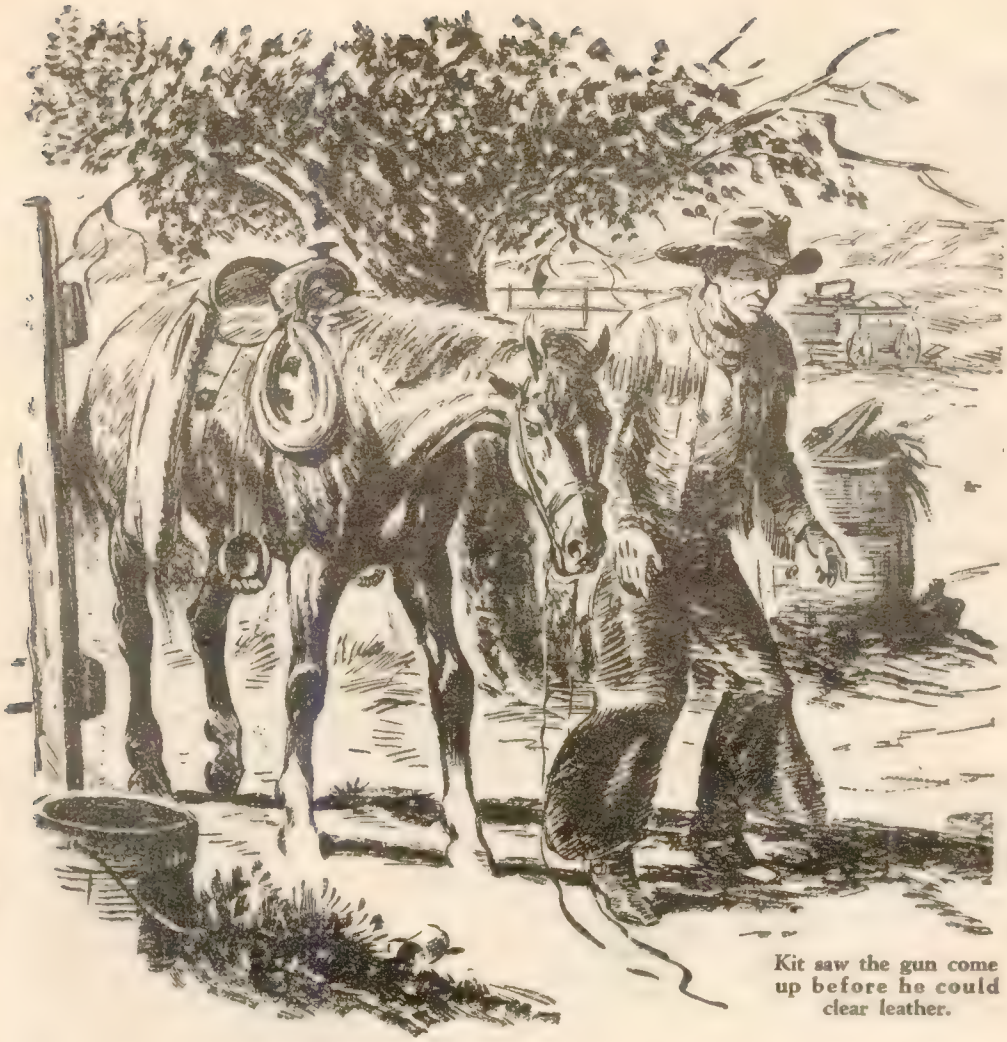


Kit saw the gun come up before he could clear leather.

Outcast of the Purple Hills

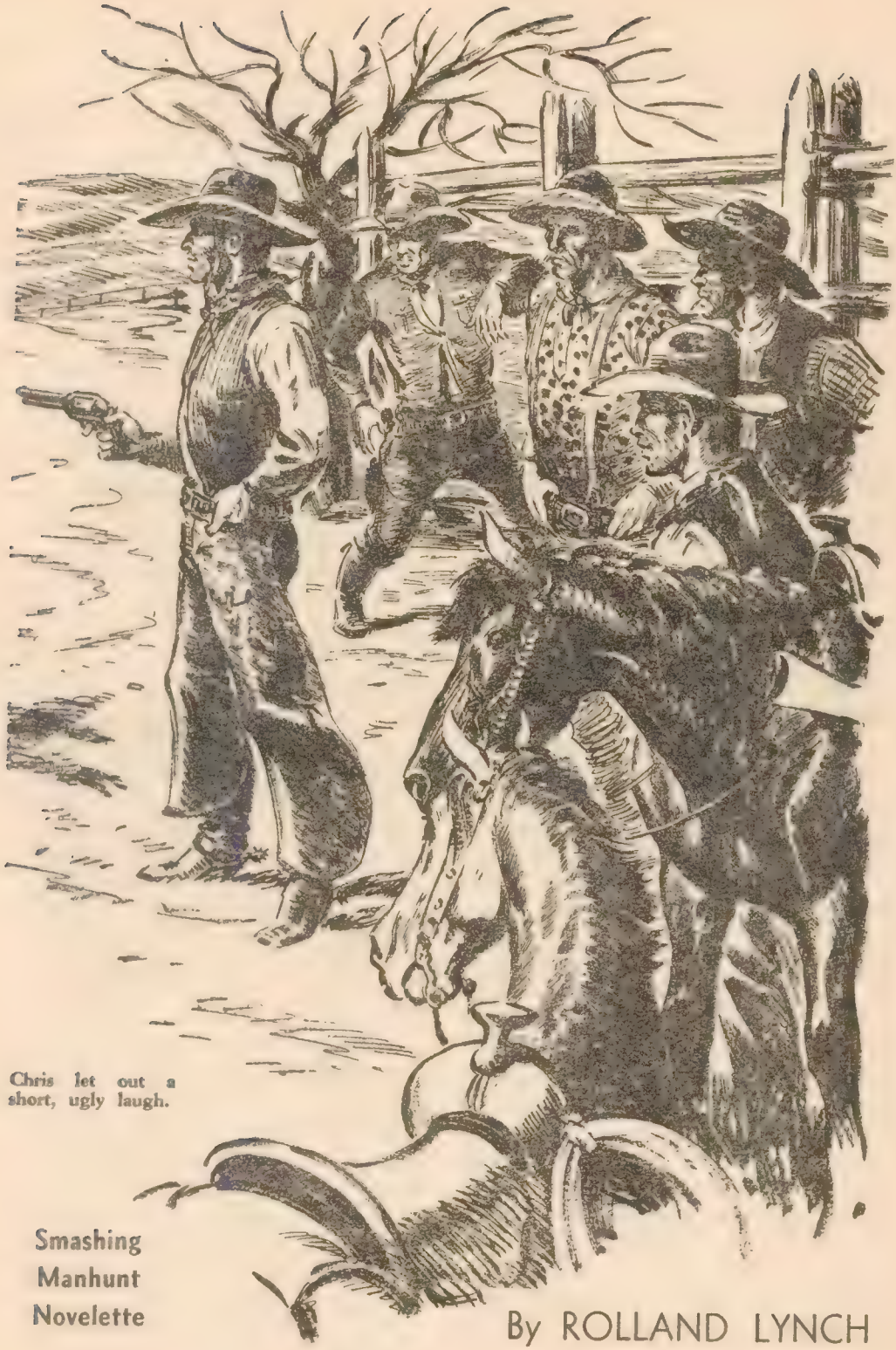
CHAPTER ONE

Gun-Proud

FAINT TRACES of evening were coming on, deepening the color of the Purple Hills, as Kit Partee rode out of the trees into the Big Fork ranch yard. His coming froze the punchers there by the pole horse corral.

They had turned at the sound of Kit's

Could even his fierce family pride or his fabulous gun-savvy save Kit Partee from the bullets of the Gila Gang—who had marked him off as the A Number 1 Sucker for the Purple Hills Range-Steal?



Chris let out a short, ugly laugh.

Smashing Manhunt Novelette

By ROLLAND LYNCH

horse and now all but one leaned back against the fence. Five pairs of eyes went quickly to Kit's thigh and, seeing no gun hung there, went up to his face.

And that face was set as hard as the granite chunks spotting these hills. His eyes were flint-gray and his shoulders were hunched forward. And the Partee pride they all knew so well, was shining out from him.

Kit rode up to them and swung down. He seemed taller when he lit, his shoulders broader as he let the reins of his horse trail. Chris McFee, who had not moved back against the corral rails with his men, faced him squarely, his sun-browned face set as hard as Kit's. The punchers looked warily from one to the other and down at the gun on Chris' leg.

Kit spoke directly to Chris, "Talk has it you've said my brother Deuce is running with the Gila Gang."

Chris' full lips curled a little. "Do you believe everything you hear?"

"Very seldom," answered Kit heavily. "But you brag about being an honest man, McFee. Did you make that talk, or not?"

Chris let the silence run for a moment. Then a malicious grin revealed his square teeth. "I am an honest man, Partee," he said. "And I'll tell you right now. Your damn clannish Partee pride will get you nowhere. Deuce has always been a black sheep—nothin' but a gambler and gunman."

"Common knowledge," admitted Kit slowly. "But a square gambler who never used a gun unless another used one first. As far as pride is concerned, that's our business. Did you or did you not speak of him so?"

"It would appear," said Chris darkly, "Deuce would come to no good."

"You're evading the answer," charged Kit. "Speak up. Did you or did you not?"

"Could be."

"Did you?"

This insistence had wormed its way into Chris now and his heavy face became flushed. The stout Kentucky pride of the Partee's had always been a hard thing to swallow for the people of Bad Water Valley—hard to digest because it was a loyalty they had never possessed and a pride of accomplishment they could never achieve.

Chris' brows drew together. "Sure I did. It's common knowledge around the valley and in these hills."

"Common only because you see fit to make it common," snapped Kit. "I can't let you say that about Deuce, McFee. Shuck your belt, I'm coming in."

Kit moved forward, but when he saw Chris' hand come around and rest on the gun butt there on his leg, he stopped.

"Dropping or drawing?" he asked narrowly.

Chris' eyes flicked away to his four punchers leaning there against the corral poles. A smirk turned his lips. The four men's expressions were stoic, but they, too, showed their resentment against this proud man standing before their boss.

Then with incredible speed, Chris looked back and drew his gun, leveling it on Kit. When he saw he had not made Partee flinch before the unexpectedness of it, he let out a short, ugly laugh and tossed the weapon at the feet of one of his men. Kit moved forward again.

HIS balled fists were coming up as Chris cursed and lunged. Kit met him with a driving right to the chest that whooshed wind from Chris' lungs. But he caught a fist that caromed off his temple, sending splinters of light darting through his eyes.

Chris got hold of Kit's left hand and pulled him violently toward him, ducking his thick shoulder at the same time. That shoulder dug hard into the apex of Kit's breast and knocked the wind out of him. The two reeled back from each other, mouths open, greedily sucking for air.

Then Kit was moving doggedly in again, hearing now the cries of the four punchers:

"Peel his proud hide, Chris!"

"Spur 'im to death."

"Brand 'im good!"

"Take his taw, Boss."

Chris slugged at him. Kit pumped his arms like pistons. And thus they stood, cuffing at each other as two berserk bears would battle over a cub. Slashing, hammering, clawing. It was a magnificent test of endurance, with neither giving an inch under the punishment. So vicious was the action, the four punchers were struck silent, their mouths hanging open, no sound issuing from them.

And the pace began to tell. Both began to slow down. Kit's body was an aching bundle of bruised flesh and he felt the sting leaving his attack. But through his own numbed brain he could sense, too, that Chris' power was waning.

Kit marshalled his remaining strength and swung a roundhouse right. Had it connected it would have torn Chris' head from his shoulders. But Chris was reeling back in his exhauston and Kit swung himself off his feet, sprawling into the boot-churned dust.

And like the cowardly pack awaiting their leader's kill, the four punchers surged forward with their boots. In this moment's madness, they were driven by their natural hatred of a proud man who fought for his family's name.

They kicked at his prone form, cursing wildly. Kit's head and body writhed with new pain as he tried to roll away from the savagery of their boots.

Chris finally panted, "That's enough, boys."

The punchers stepped back, winded more from their savage emotions than their exertions. Their faces were screwed into harsh, ugly masks from this thing they had done, and the flush of inward shame was beginning to well within them.

KIT lay prone for long moments, the acrid dust biting into his nose and clogging this cotton-dry mouth. Then he pressed his splayed fingers against the earth and tried to rise. The effort made his chest a ball of fire. He got to his hands and knees but could rise no further.

He heard one of the punchers say, "Not so proud lookin' right now."

Kit caught sight of his horse standing patiently nearby and, mustering all his remaining strength, crawled toward the dangling stirrup. Reaching it, he pulled himself upright and clung reelingly to the saddle horn. His body was one huge ache and he swayed from the pain of it.

With his free hand, he pawed the perspiration from his eyes and got a foot into the leather. With a grunt of exertion that threatened blackness, he made it up on the saddle.

He sat there for a moment, letting his head clear. Then he reached forward and retrieved the reins. There was a proud cant to his head as he looked at Chris and the four punchers there against the corral poles. He nodded as if to himself and murmured through puffed lips: "Another time. Another time."

"Anytime," said Chris. "And if one more head of cattle is gone from this spread, your brother gets a worse dose."

Kit managed to stiffen himself with that fierce pride within him and he said, "If I had a gun, I'd kill you for that."

"You haven't enough left to pull a trigger," laughed Chris. "You can make up your mind now—the proud Partees are in for a rough ride from here on out."

Kit lifted his reins and slowly turned his mount. Both rider and horse plodded head down from the ranch yard into the timber of the Purple Hills. The first softness of evening was creeping down from the higher reaches and the coloring Kit had so long loved at this time of day was lost on him. For everything looked very dark to his aching eyes.

CHAPTER TWO

Bad Water Bend

THE PURPLE twilight had come as Kit Partee rode back to his cabin. He stared steadily at his horse's head, looking back down a long and bitter trail that seemed even now to threaten to make life ahead equally as bad.

For Old Doc John Partee had been a pride-filled Kentuckian who had defended his heritage with both pistol and family fortune. He had brought that clannish pride with him into this valley and into these hills. And the fortune gained from his medical profession had been spent in his stubborn fight to preserve the ways of the decadent South he had loved so well. When the war between the States had been finished, he had continued its bitterness. For him that war only ended the night he went down under blazing guns of person or persons unknown.

And that same fierce pride had been carried on by both Kit and Deuce, even though both had fought in the war and was glad of its end. They did not approve of its continuance by their father, but they backed his opinions.

Because of this pride of theirs, Kit knew that what was said about Deuce running with the Gila Gang was not true. Family tradition would not let Deuce cheat nor steal. Fast with a pistol and an insatiable love for gambling, these had earned him an unjust reputation—but Deuce was not bad. Not unless Deuce had developed the hatred in mind so stubborn in their father.

Kit remembered when he had tried to talk Deuce into moving to the Purple Hills with him.

"It'll be a fresh start, kid," he had said. "A place where we can forget the old life."

"What's the matter with the old?" Deuce had asked with a grin. "Me saw logs and herd mangy cows when the heaviest thing I have to lift now is my hole card? I'm staying right here in Bad Water Bend and digging my gold out of sucker's pockets."

"But—"

"Why they even reach in and bring out the money for you. Work—Hah!"

And so Kit had ridden into his Purple Hills and slaved away. He was on the verge of attaining his desire—a paying ranch—and the future thought of bringing a bride home to share his fortune.

Now the old talk of the clannish Partees had reared its ugly head, and there was nothing to do but put it down to survive. The black thought of his father dying in ambush while on a mercy medical call rode him hard now.

As he entered the clearing leading to his cabin, the cool mountain down draft had cleared his senses and strength was returning to his body. He looked up and saw the horse there at the lower hitch rack. He pulled his own to a stop.

Straining his eyes, he studied the animal closely. It was not a familiar one and not a horse Deuce would have ridden. Deuce would have come on a livery nag, for he had no love of horseflesh. This owner did, for the animal was of good quarter breed. Kit caught a movement within his cabin.

He slid from his saddle and ground-anchored his mount. Then he went forward at a crouching run. He made the side of the cabin and put his ear to the wall. There was the sound of booted feet, then silence as they stopped by the front door.

Quickly, Kit slid around the corner of the wall and up to the door, flattening there beside it. He held his breath.

THEN the figure stepped into the night and Kit lunged, spinning the man and driving him hard into the ground. A frightening scream sent him rolling away with a startled exclamation.

For the voice was that of a woman. And as the small, mannish-clad figure gained its feet, her hand spit fire and a bullet chugged into the dust beside Kit's head.

"Hold it!" he cried.

"You hold it," snapped a furious feminine voice. "Did you think you were bulldogging a steer? Who are you? Speak up!"

Kit had to chuckle. She was really mad. "I own the place," he said, "and I'm touchy about who gets in without an invitation. If you came to steal something, tell me what it is and I'll give it to you."

"Harrumph!" she snorted derisively. "You're just like your brother said. You've lived alone so long your brain's addled."

Kit lunged to his feet. "Deuce?" he said. "Deuce? You've talked to him?"

"You could, at least, bulldogger," she said scornfully, "invite a lady into the house so we can have some light on the subject."

Kit showed a bit of his own temper now as he went past her into the cabin. "There's always a light for a lady, but if you'll wait just a moment I'll roll out the red carpet, Your Highness."

She followed him into the room, remaining by the door as he touched a match to the lamp. When he had trimmed the wick to kill the smoke, he turned and looked at her.

Her figure was slender and boyish in levis and plaid shirt. Copious blond hair spilled from under the flat crowned sombrero she wore to frame a delicately tanned face. She had her square little chin thrust out at him now and her full, curving rich lips were pulled thin. There was a blaze smouldering deep within her smoky blue eyes.

She said now, "I hope you're quite finished. Staring at a person like that. No wonder somebody pushed your face in."

Kit flushed and pawed consciously at his bruised countenance. Then he snapped at her. "I see little of which you should be so proud. You spoke of Deuce, Your Highness."

"My name," she said coldly, "is Minty Dorne, daughter of Mac Dorne of the Lazy D."

"I've heard of the iron," acknowledged Kit laconically.

"And maybe, by chance," she said, "have a few head of them running with yours."

When Kit bowed his neck and anger shot into his eyes, she said quickly, "I'm sorry I said that. But we're all so upset, with the Gila Gang deviling us right and left."

Kit motioned her to a chair and took the one across the table from her. "I suppose," he said slowly, "you came to tell me he's one of them and I should do something about it."

"You jump to conclusions like you jump at people," she reprimanded. "I've come because he's always spoken so highly of you." Her voice became gentle and low. "But he has been acting mighty mysterious lately. He needs you now, Kit. Needs you badly."

Kit looked down at the table top. A strange emotion shot through him at the use of his name. Then he realized her softness of tone had been prompted by thoughts of Deuce. He immediately thrust his feelings down and looked back up at her.

"What is he doing now?" he asked. "Anything bad?"

SHE studied Kit for a moment herself and again there were great depths behind those smoky blue eyes. "Nothing for the moment you can put your finger on," she said. "Not yet. But he's seemed to have fallen under the spell of Lita Montez's charm—and anything might happen."

Kit grunted with relief. "He's always had an eye for beauty," he said. "You're probably just jealous."

Minty's eyes blazed. "No such thing," she snapped.

"Like a drunk," taunted Kit. "The more he's had, the soberer he claims."

Blood stained her cheeks and she looked as if she would strike him. But she choked back that desire and rose. "I see you're not interested," she said and turned.

"Sit down!" barked Kit. "Don't get your dander up. You love Deuce."

She turned and resumed her chair, saying thoughtfully and with unseeing eyes, "I really don't know."

'About this Montez woman?" prompted Kit.

Minty's face clouded and her eyes came back into focus. "She's the daughter of Santiago Montez who runs the La Luz Cantina. He has been suspected as the Gila Gang leader, but no one has ever been able to prove it. They're a small bunch and there has never been a leak as to their identity.

"But now Deuce has been hanging around the cantina in Lita's company. That's the reason for the gossip about him. People are so quick to condemn whether they have foundation for it or not. I thought perhaps you could talk some sense into him before he gets involved."

Kit's fingers drummed on the table top as he stared at the cabin wall. When his eyes returned to hers, he found Minty regarding him closely. His fists balled.

"I hope," he said, "I don't have to talk with these. I'd like to see this Montez woman first."

He rose and went to the peg on the wall and belted on his gun. When he was done tying the smooth holster down to his thigh, he again found Minty Dorne studying him, her eyes a little wide now.

He went over and blew out the lamp. "Let's hit the saddle," he said gruffly.

Minty followed Kit out through the darkness into twilight's glow. And as Kit's broad shoulders swung through the gloom, her smoky blue eyes watched after him wonderingly. For there was a strange emotion within her she could not catalogue.

She should dislike him thoroughly for his rudeness, but she found she did not. She finally put her emotions down with the philosophy that anyone with the Partee name had this infectious way about them—especially for the feminine sex. She swung into her saddle and sided Kit as he took the trail leading down and out of the Purple Hills.

CHAPTER THREE

Guns in the Night

THE STARS began streaking the sky—low, soft diamonds glittering there in the fading blue. The faint sour smell of dust kicked up by the horses' hoofs mingled with the delicate odor of pine to sting the nostrils like heady wine.

It caused Minty Dorne to murmur softly, "It's beautiful."

Kit said, "A garden for the gods. No king has ever commanded such a countryside."

"Why," said Minty, with wonderment, "there's romance in your soul. You love these hills."

"There's no place in Kentucky," said Kit fervently, "even the Blue Grass, that can rival it. The Purple Hills have everything. Beauty, feed, water. Could anyone ask for more?"

"Just a little more," said Minty thoughtfully.

"That will come in due time," said Kit.

Then he looked at her and found her face tilted to his, the star shine bringing out the soft curve of her rich lips slightly parted to reveal her even white teeth. The brim of her sombrero kept her eyes in

deep shadow, but Kit had a feeling stars were shining in them, too.

They wound their way out of the hills onto the flat of Bad Water Valley. And each had their own thoughts of this early evening, and had they been aware in this moment, they would have been astonished how closely their minds had run along the same trail.

THEY RODE into the yellow lights of Bad Water Bend here where the creek cut its bight against the lower reaches of the Purple Hills. Stores split the main street with dwellings backing them in ugly scatteration.

On the street, before the Bad Water Bank, Kit reined in and Minty stopped beside him. "Where'll I find the La Luz?" he asked.

"I'll show you," she said.

"You'll go home," said Kit sternly.

Minty's chin came out again. "I've an interest in this, too."

"You can take that up with Deuce after I'm done with him," snapped Kit. "The moon'll be full in a few days."

Minty emitted that derisive snort. "You're an ignorant fool, Mr Partee. Lita Montez will twist you around her little finger just as she has Deuce."

"No woman can twist me," he said with fierce dignity.

"You can't even handle me," she belittled. "So I'll string right along." With that she lifted the reins of her horse and went down the street toward the Mexican settlement there at the far edge of town where Bad Water Creek made the turn against the cliffs.

Kit watched her for a moment, a tiny thing there in the saddle, her back straight, shoulders square for a woman. She was a little bundle of dynamite if he had ever seen one. But she belonged to Deuce—and he had his moment's envy of that.

With a deep sigh, he clucked to his mount and followed.

Adobe hovels took up when the false fronts left off. Here the rectangles of light splashing from the windows were more subdued and the streets darker, more ominous. This served to stiffen Kit in the saddle with a wary watchfulness. He ranged up beside Minty.

She turned into one of the darkest streets leading down toward the creek. Before a large adobe, ghostly in the star shine, she reined up to the hitch rack and swung down. Kit sided her.

He said gruffly. "This's no place for you."

"Why," she smiled, and a flash like quicksilver ran across her face, "you sound real concerned about me."

Again that strange emotion stabbed Kit and gave him a tremendous desire to sweep her to him and explore this warmth she showed him now. But the knowledge of her and Deuce stopped him.

He began harshly, "No lady would—"

"I'm no lady," she cut across him crisply, the moment's illusion created by his tall, broad shape killed by his rudeness. She turned into the cantina.

Kit was at her shoulder point as they entered the barroom. Here was the sickly sweet smell of tequilla and stale beer. And through this rode the heavy tang of kerosene from the guttering lamps. In the far corner of the room two men dozed, their serapes pulled up about their chins and sombreros tugged down over their brown faces.

A lone Mexican rested both elbows on the dirty bar, a bottle of beer before him. He was a tough looking vaquero, obviously the bouncer.

A FAT, greasy bartender rode a high stool at the far end of the bar. He rose lazily from it now and waddled down the aisle, his pig-like eyes narrowing and flickering a message to the vaquero when he saw his customers were gringos.

"Que querra?" he rumbled surlily.

Kit's eyes slid around the room again. The dozing men in the dark corner remained motionless, but the man at the bar had turned a little and was peering sideways out of his dark eyes. Kit said, "We'd like to talk to Lita Montez."

"Por que?" asked the bartender, darkly.

Kit's brows drew together and he was about to speak sharply to the bartender when Minty nudged him and said to the man, "We'll discuss our business with her. This's Deuce Partee's brother."

Kit saw the bouncer pull quickly away from the bar and his hand go toward a hidden knife. And as swiftly as that man had moved, Kit was around Minty, grabbing him by the shoulder.

The Mexican swore luridly and tried to break away, but Kit pulled him around and rammed his head into the bar. There was a sickening crunch and the man went limp. Kit let him fall to the filthy floor.

A quick glance at Minty showed she had her hand on her gun and was tempting the bartender to make a move. The greasy man had his hands on the bar, completely cowed by the girl. A flash of abject admiration shot through Kit for her. Minty was as calm as a veteran. She was a woman to ride the river with—and again he begrudged Deuce the possession of her.

The commotion awakened the men in the dark corner, but they did not move, just watched warily with dark, glittering eyes from under their sombrero brims. The door at the end of the bar opened and a girl in tight, black-bodiced gown stood there, the light at her back outlining her boldly.

She said, *"Que es?"*

Then her eyes found the sprawled figure of her bouncer and returned to Kit and Minty. Her head turned a little and she said something out of the side of her mouth. A door slammed back there.

Kit walked toward her, Minty following as Kit said, "Lita Montez?"

"Who else?" spat Minty.

The girl made her study of Kit before answering. Then she said in a deep throaty voice, *"Si,* Señor. Can I be of service? Come in." She stepped aside to allow entrance into the room.

Minty would have gone first, but Kit put a firm hand on her shoulder, stopping her as he brushed quickly past. His eyes searched the place out.

It was a bare room with high, deep recessed windows. A door emptied somewhere out into the back of the building. That was the one Kit had heard slam. A round table was in the room's center, five chairs against it. On the table was a bottle of tequilla and one glass. The room was heavy with smoke and a cheroot still glowed dully there in the ash tray.

Lita Montez laughed softly at Kit's suspicions. "You were expecting something, Señor?"

"One can never be sure," he answered easily and sank down into a chair. Minty took one beside him, her hat shoved back a little from her forehead. The smoky blue of her eyes was flint-gray now. Had the same thought struck her as it had Kit? He decided it had, from the thrust of her chin.

LITA slunk into a chair opposite Kit and he had his first real look at her. Her dark beauty seemed to make the room less shabby. The smooth olive skin, dark flashing eyes and black brows and hair seemed carved and colored by a master's hand. Her ripe, red lips were magnets that would draw any man if she so desired.

And because of this, Kit was not as abrupt as he had intended to be. He said, "I'm Deuce Partee's brother."

"Who just left here," put in Minty coldly. "He's the only one in Bad Water Bend who smokes those kind of cigars."

Lita ignored Minty completely and smiled lazily at Kit. "There is a strong family resemblance, Señor. But I dare say

you are somewhat the more handsome."

"Why—" stammered Kit, nonplussed.

"Oh, Lord!" breathed Minty. Then in a strident voice, "Why did you tip Deuce to leave before we came into the room?"

"Señorita," said Lita reproachfully, "I do not know what you mean."

"You know what I mean without me putting it in Mexican," she snapped. "What have you got to hide?"

Kit was a little startled at the change in Lita's dark eyes. And with this hard change, he noticed, too, an attitude of listening about her, as if she was expecting some sort of signal. He glanced at Minty and saw the hackles were up on her neck as a small terrier's would stand. Minty was unaware of Lita's attitude because of her intense dislike of this woman.

"I have nothing to hide," said Lita coldly. "If you can't hold a man—"

"I can hold the one I'd really want," Minty cut across her. "Kit and I are interested in your snaky influence on him."

Blood stained Lita's cheeks and her eyes became diamond hard. Again, Kit had that feeling she was waiting for something. Tension began to mount within him. And he was a little nonplussed by the bluntness of these two woman. This was a little out of his line.

"Deuce," said Lita coolly, "is a man who has a mind of his own."

"Not," said Minty, "when a pretty face and scheming mind intrigues him. You'd love to drag him down by having him throw in with your father. You'd like nothing better than help ruin the Partee name in this valley."

Lita rose to her feet, her body trembling. It was her desire, Kit knew, to order them out, but that did not come. She spat out: "I mind my own business. Why don't you mind yours?"

"Anything pertaining to the Partees is my business," said Minty flatly, and came to her feet.

Kit rose, too, shifting from one foot to the other. There was fight in these women and he was at a loss as to how to try and control it. He looked from one to the other of the set faces, feeling the hatred flowing between them.

The dull popping of shots broke the tension. The sounds came from uptown, flat sound sheering weakly through the thick adobe walls. There was a quick spatter of them and then silence.

A hard smile broke Lita Montez's lips. This then, Kit knew, was what she had been waiting to hear. The girl whirled quickly and reached the door leading into the barroom. She flung it open, saying harshly, "You can have your precious Deuce Partee now—dead!"

Then she was gone, slamming the door behind her. There was the dull thud of a bar slipping into place.

Kit leaped at that door, trying it. It was securely fastened. He turned to Minty. Clouds of anxiety rolled behind her eyes.

"Let's get uptown and see what's happened," he clipped out. "She's roped Deuce in, all right."

They both went quickly out the back way. They could hear the rapid run of hoofs leaving Bad Water Bend.

CHAPTER FOUR

Last of the Partees

KIT PARTEE and Minty Dorne raced around the corner of the adobe cantina and into a narrow alley leading onto the street. Minty untied the horses as Kit shoved the swinging doors of the La Luz and then returned to leap into his saddle.

"Gone," he hushed gruffly, spinning his mount. They went up the street and turned onto the main one at a dead run.

Lights were flickering on along the street and dark shapes were running toward the Bad Water Bank. A group had already collected there. Kit and Minty

reined down and flung themselves from the saddle. Then Kit was pushing his way through the gathering into its center, Minty following through the hole he made.

Kit pulled up short in the center of the curious townsmen. Sheriff Cy Cordner lay inert there in the dust, a dark stain spreading along the earth at his left shoulder. His gun lay near his splayed fingers.

Kit moved swiftly, expertly, using the knowledge he had gleaned from his father. He whipped out his bandana and knelt down. Exploring fingers found the ugly wound and pressed against the artery, halting the pumping blood. He could hear the crowd's comment now:

"The Gila Gang."

"Every dime in the bank—that breaks the valley."

"Cy musta winged one. Blood on the floor in there."

"There was five of 'em intsead of the usual four. By God, I seen 'em ride off. Wonder who the new one is."

This last was like a deluge of cold water on Kit. Who else other than Deuce Partee? But he recalled Lita Montez's last words, "You can have Deuce back now, dead." She must have meant they used him for a front, and he was the one who had been it.

He barked out, "Someone get the doc."

"Meeker's in Prescott," vouched someone. "There ain't nobody else."

Another voice said, "Ain't that you, Partee? You're Ol' Man taught you what to do. Bring 'im around so he can tell us who the dirty skunks are. He was close enough to identify every one of 'em."

For a long moment Kit was still. Sure, he could bring the sheriff around. If he did, that would definitely tie Deuce in with the Gila Gang, brand him forever in the eyes of men. Or he could let the lawman die, and no one would ever really know.

He looked up at Minty Dorne outlined there in the star shine. She was looking down at him, her chin out-thrust, deep emotion rampant within her smoky blue eyes. And she was telling him, as if using spoken words, she knew his thoughts. That she was aware of the struggle going on within him.

But her manner was neither condemning nor helpful. She just showed him a calm patience that would break from her own thoughts once he made his decision.

Kit looked back down at Sheriff Cy Cordner blanched and drawn there in the dust. He heard a woman stifle a sob and saw strong arms hold her back from thrusting herself onto the man. Those strong arms comforted Mrs. Cordner, the arms of honest men who stood behind this kind of law.

Kit said bleakly to Minty, "Get me some hot water and a long, thin knife."

MINTY stared at him for a moment, then a beautiful softness stole over her face. She smiled, a line of white flashing across the darkness of her face. Then she was turning, shoving at the crowd, crying out in a voice through which joy sheered.

"Hot water, a long thin knife. Kit will bring him around. Shake a leg, one of you!"

As if by magic, Minty was once again at his side with a pan of steaming water, towels and a thin boning knife.

Kit ordered the crowd. "Stand back so I can get the light from the bank window." They obeyed with a quick scuffling of feet. The yellow rectangle burst on the grisly scene.

He looked up at the sheriff's wife. "I'll do my best," he murmured.

"God Bless you, my boy," she said fervently.

Kit swished the knife in the water and went to work. He tried to remember all the answers his curious questions had brought from his father. But he found himself without the necessary equipment.

So he had to go on in his crude, natural way, praying he made no mistakes.

And as he worked, a deep anger grew within him that a Partee should have a hand in such as this. Cy Cordner was a fine, upstanding citizen with a good wife who now stood grief-stricken, torn asunder deep within by a gang who regarded life but lightly.

In this case, Deuce be damned, and all others of the owlhoot ilk. With a sigh, Kit finished his bandage and rocked back on his cramped legs.

"Whiskey," he muttered hoarsely.

It was then he saw Chris McFee and his four punchers there inside the circle of townsmen. How long they had been there, he did not know, but those same hostile lights were in their eyes. But Kit no longer cared. In a moment, Chris would get his proof of what he believed about Deuce. Then the Partee name would lie here in the dust and everyone would be happy.

A townsman handed him a bottle of whiskey.

Kit reached down and parted the lawman's lips, pouring a few drops past them. Then he straightened and, without looking at Minty Dorne, took a long pull at the bottle himself.

Sheriff Cy Cordner stirred, groaning through clenched teeth. Kit bent down quickly and pressed more liquor to his lips, conscious of the gathering's murmur.

In a moment, the lawman's eyes fluttered open and fixed on Kit's face. After a second's struggle for recognition, a wan smile parted his lips. He spoke with an effort, but so silent was the crowd, his every word was audible:

"I guess I got a lot to thank the Partees for. What you've just done and what Deuce did." His voice tailed off with weakness.

"Easy does it," cautionel Kit. Well, this was it. What Deuce had just done. A great bitterness welled within Kit.

Then the lawman seemed to grow suddenly stronger with great effort. His voice was clear:

"Get a posse together and hit for the the ford. Deuce is in danger, Kit. He's been my deputy for a month now, to help me break the Gila Gang, but something's gone haywire."

"What?" expostulated Kit.

"He's my deputy," repeated Cy. "We figured the only way to break the gang was to work from within. He accepted the assignment. They were too damn slick to ever show their hand. So he played up to Lita Montez, who has always been our strongest suspicion. He got in on this bank job fronting for them. Now he's dropping playing cards to lead the way to the hideout, if he's still alive.

"One of them cracked down on him when they saw me comin'. Santiago is wise now. Find them as quick as you can Kit."

Cy was spent and closed his eyes.

KIT LEAPED to his feet, looking first to Minty with triumph in his eyes. She was smiling at him, his face composed with tender understanding. Then he looked at Chris McFee. Big Chris was staring at him, his mouth agape, confusion written there. His four punchers ringed him, showing their confusion, too.

Cy Cordner's wife tore from her comforters and hugged Kit. "Thank you and bless you," she repeated over and over.

Kit put her from him, saying "I'm glad to have been of service. You can take over from here." Then his voice rose, "Any of you who want to fork a horse and break this gang once and for all, get in the saddle!"

Then he was brushing past Minty and going to his horse. He swung into the leather while men ran for their mounts. He calculated the time. Dawn was yet hours away but it would take that much time to reach the ford. With a great kick-

ing of dust and yelling, the posse formed around him. Kit looked them over.

Most of the men carried rifles over saddle pommels. His eyes narrowed as he spotted Chris McFee and his four men in the group. Then Minty Dorne was ranging alongside him. He was about to speak, but thought better of it at her expression. She wasn't a woman to be denied, and he remembered how helpless he had been against her on this very same street but a few hours ago.

Kit raised his hand, commanding silence. He said, "From what Cy told us, Deuce in throwing cards to lead us to the gang's hideout. When we get there, it's my show. Anyone with other ideas, drop out now."

He waited a long moment, seeing the complete composure of Minty Dorne. He had his quick envy of Deuce and his future with this wonderful girl. He roughly shrugged off his thoughts and wheeled his horse to lead the posse off through the darkness.

And as he rode toward the ford, there was a silent singing within him. All this malicious gossip riding the valley about Deuce Partee was all clear now. The tradition of the family had been upheld. He cursed himself for ever wavering from his opinion of this fact, but he had to admit evidence had pointed heavily against Deuce.

The ghost gray of dawn was streaking the land when Kit led the posse up to the ford. Here he raised his hand for a halt.

He turned in his stirrups and ordered, "When we cross, fan out and try to spot the first card. Sing out when you do. Look sharp." He urged his horse into the turgid waters of Bad Water Creek.

On the other side, the men fanned out, their mounts plodding slowly as their riders scanned the ground.

It was Minty Dorne's shout that brought them boiling about her. She had quit her horse and held four cards in her hand. Her face was darkly cast and her lips trembled a little. "Aces and eights," she murmured, "with blood on them."

Kit's temper was a quick thing within him. Dead man's hand, and he was wounded. Again Lita Montez's words struck at him. "—and dead."

"Circle!" snapped Kit. "See if we can pick up another sign."

He spun his horse savagely and begun his ride. Again it was Minty's shout gathering them together. She was a quarter of a mile up stream.

SHE WAS holding to another card. Strain was beginning to show about the corners of her lips. Her intuition was working overtime. For Kit saw she had diagnosed the gang's movement perfectly. They had crossed the ford, re-entered the water and worked up stream to cover sign. But Minty's love for Deuce had seen through this ruse.

He said to the men, "We'll hang back. We've got the best trailer in the business leading the way. Show us, Miss Dorne."

She looked up at him and he thought he saw deep reproach in her eyes. But the expression was so quickly gone he could not rightfully say.

Minty turned and studied the terrain. Then she swung into her saddle and rode slowly off toward the reaches of the Purple Hills. The sun rose to throw its golden lances against the higher scarps. The posse patiently watched the girl.

Four hundred yards away, she raised her hand and quickened her pace. Kit and the men reined forward, seeing the playing card as they rode past the spot. Deuce was still alive.

High into the canyon, they followed the girl, moving ahead with each wave of her hand. They closed in on her where an errant ridge cut across the canyon. Kit rode forward cautiously to join her as she pointed down.

There in the meadow below was a small

cabin. Six horses stood hock sprung at the rack before it.

"Six now," muttered Kit.

"Lita," said Minty.

Kit nodded thoughtfully, studying the layout. When his plans were made, he rode back with Minty following.

He said to the men, "Chris, you and your boys follow along the canyon floor and get in behind the meadow to cut them off that way. Jim, you and four others get over on the right side. Grat, you and the rest take the left."

"And I?" asked Minty.

"Cover me going in," said Kit. "This's my show. Let's move."

The men reined away to obey his orders. When they were alone, Minty said, with great concern, "You're a fool for going in alone."

"God watches over fools," murmured Kit abstractly.

"Not as big a one as you," she said.

He looked at her keenly. "Why," he grinned broadly, "I believe you're concerned. Deuce wouldn't appreciate that."

A flush stained her cheeks. "Besides being a fool," she snapped, "you're an ignorant idiot."

"That," he countered drily, "is the nicest thing you've said to me today."

Then he turned away afoot, pulling the rifle from the saddle scabbard and handing it to Minty.

"I hope," he said, "you can use this as well as you can your pistol."

She said caustically, "If you feel a sneeze coming on when you get close, signal and I'll put a slug under your nose to drive it back."

That snapped the tension within Kit and he laughed. "Bet you could, too," he said and dropped over the ridge in a low crouch, heading for the stand of timber to the left of the cabin.

Carefully, he made his way down the steep canyon side and gained the shelter of the pines. More swiftly, he made his way to the far edge where he could see the cabin.

Here, fifty feet from the cabin, Kit waited until he saw that all the men were in position. Chris and his punchers had wiggled to the edge of the clearing, shoving their rifles before them. Jim and Grat's men were in place. Minty's flat crowned sombrero and rifle muzzle were visible on the ridge behind him. Kit got his gun in his fist and took off for the blind cabin wall at a crouching run.

HIS BREATH was heaving when he made it. The tension and fear of what had happened to Deuce, winded him more than the effort. He froze against the wall.

A cursing voice sheered through to him. "He's out again. Lita, another bucket of water for thees peeg of a traitor. He must die the slow death." That was the voice of Santiago Montez.

There was the patter of feet and the sound of thrown water accompanied by ribald laughter.

Santiago said, "See, the once proud Partee opens his eyes. Thees death ees too good for you, badge-toter!" There was the sound of a cracking whip and a loud groan.

Redness flashed across Kit's eyes. With a heavy oath, he eared the hammer of his gun and lunged around the corner of the cabin. Like a huge boulder amuck, he barged through the door, nearly tearing it from its hinges.

So engrossed were they in their torment of Deuce lashed shirtless there in a chair, the gang were caught unawares. They turned to stare, startled at the sight of Kit.

There was Santiago Montez of the brutal, swarthy face with the bull whip in his hand. Gyp Diamond, Cas Mitchell and Snake Milner watching with amusement. Kit realized he had once brought them a drink in town, not knowing who they

were. Lita Montez was against the far wall, her dark eyes hard as diamonds as she enjoyed this beating.

Behind Kit was the sound of fast running feet. Then the Gila Gang were erupting into action and Kit was fanning the hammer of his pistol, fanning fast, driven by a red rage that threatened to blank out his senses.

Acrid gunsmoke stung his nostrils and he felt an invisible thing strike at his shoulder and send a terrible pain down his arm. Then his gun was empty and the Gila Gang lay on the floor. Kit reeled drunkenly.

With a scream, Lita was on him, her fingers like talons gouging at his face and eyes. Kit was helpless against her furious onslaught, unable to strike back at a woman.

Then Lita was reeling back from him, driven up against the cabin wall by a small bundle of fury in levis and plaid shirt. Once Minty had Lita against the wall, she laid her pistol barrel sharply against the renegade girl's ear and stepped back to let her fall.

She turned to Kit, saying breathlessly, "I figured I'd better hurry. You aren't much for handling women."

It was the sound of Minty's running he had heard in that awful moment of silence before the action.

Kit sagged in his weakness of the shoulder wound and Minty was at his side supporting him as the possemen crowded into the room. They were shocked still for a moment by the sight meeting their eyes. With a growl, Chris McFee recovered and went directly to Deuce Partee.

"Give me a hand here," he called out.

Then they were outside in the clear air, the possemen supporting Deuce in his weakness. The wound he packed was a rib gash and not serious. He was just beaten from the whip.

Lita Montez came from the cabin, head down. She went to her horse. The posse looked to Kit for orders, but he gave none. The girl mounted dully and rode slowly down canyon. Her shoulders were wracking gently as she faded from sight along the trail.

Chris McFee moved over to where Minty held to Kit and said to him, looking down at his boots, "I got everything twisted, Partee. What I thought was false pride is the real thing. Come round up time this fall, I and the boys'll be over to lend a hand."

Then he turned away.

Kit said, "Thanks, Chris."

Minty looked up at him. "I've got to get you back to town to fix that shoulder for you."

"I'm all right," he said stubbornly. "Tend to your man."

She stared at him with her smoky blue eyes afire. "I told you you were an ignorant fool. I am looking after him."

It took Kit a moment to get that, but he did. Crimson dyed his cheeks and he stammered. "But, Deuce—?"

"Your brother," said Minty. "And a nice guy if you like town life. Personally, I like the Purple Hills. If you're the man I think you are you can ride across the valley and ask Dad if I can come over and live there."

Kit smiled down at her and he made it a point not to hide what he thought of her now. And she was responding in kind, respect and love in her eyes—respect and love for him.

"Let's just circle that way toward home and tell him to come visit us sometime," said Kit.

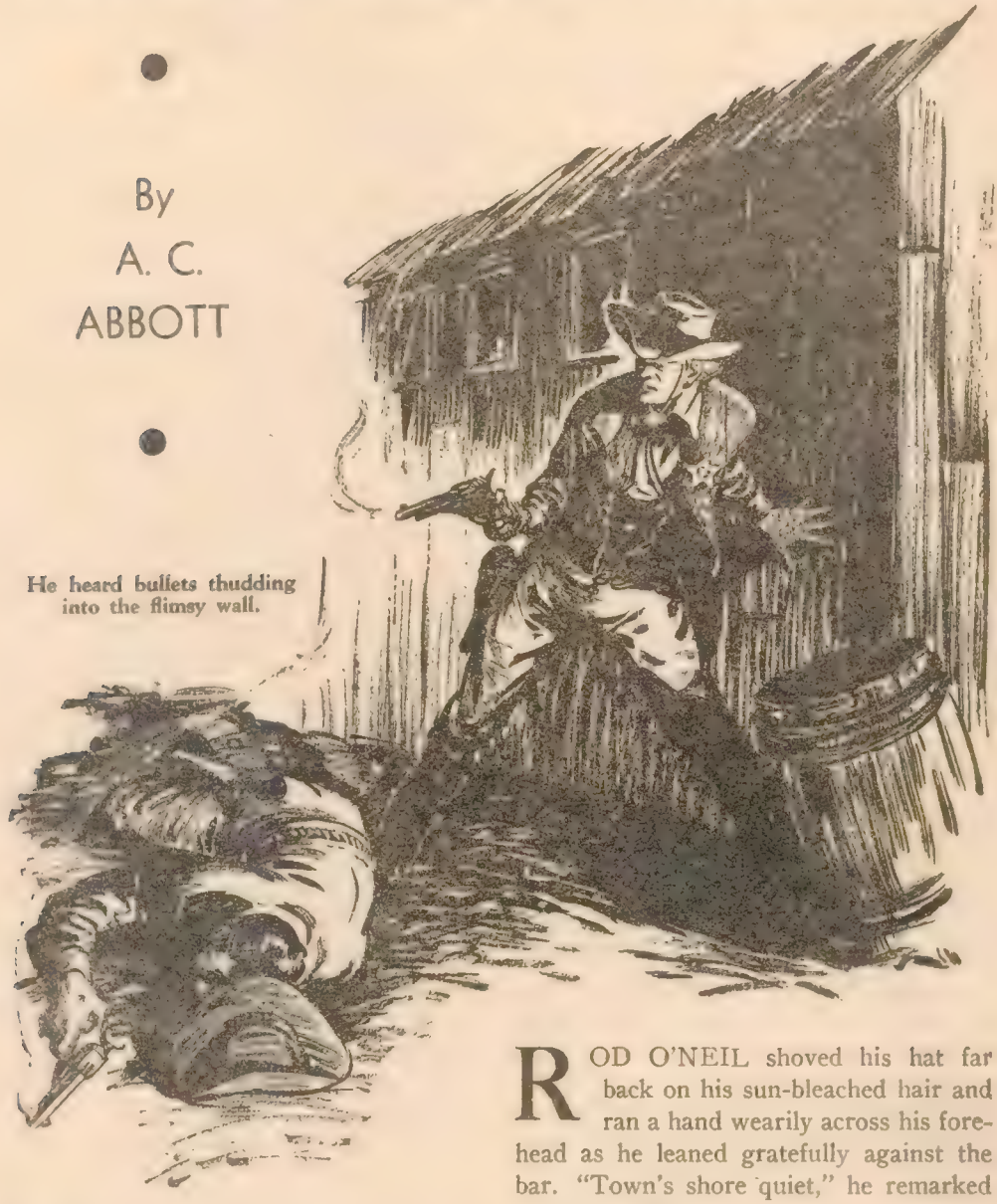
"Now," said Minty flippantly, "that's the kind of aggressive talk I like to hear from my man."

And Kit was to wonder throughout the years in his successful climb to cattle barony just whether he had been the most aggressive of the two.

THE END

TWO-SECOND TINSTAR

By
A. C.
ABBOTT



He heard bullets thudding into the flimsy wall.

Deputy Rod O'Neil could run out on the desperate, gun-bossed town that needed him, to live out his life in peace and quiet. . . . Or he could stay, and pay the price of his courage with a life that would be short, sweet, and bullet-hot!

ROD O'NEIL shoved his hat far back on his sun-bleached hair and ran a hand wearily across his forehead as he leaned gratefully against the bar. "Town's shore quiet," he remarked in his easy drawl.

"Too quiet," agreed the stocky bartender grimly. "Where's Greg?"

"He'll be along in a minute. He's checkin' on the east end while I took a look up above. I'll wait till he comes, Mike, 'fore I have a drink." Rod was a

lanky, hazel-eyed kid, barely twenty, who'd traded his cowhand's rope for a deputy's badge when his pard, Greg Sanderson, had been elected sheriff.

"You boys ought to stay indoors tonight," Mike said, his voice tight with worry.

Rod grinned over the cigarette he was rolling. "Never find out anythin' by hidin'. Dorman and his gang haven't been in, have they?"

"Haven't seen 'em but that don't mean anything." Mike hestitated awkwardly. "You boys mean too much to us folks to let anything happen to you, now especially."

"Ahuh." There was nothing in Rod's easy manner to indicate that he was scared, unaccountably. There had been other fights, plenty of them, but this time—To hide his worry and to reassure himself, he drawled with quite pride, "Greg Sanderson's goin' to be damn hard to kill."

"Only takes one bullet," Mike retorted hotly, "and if he collects it between now and tomorrow, this country's goin' to hell. We're dependin' on you fellers. As long as you boys are on the job, the local folks won't be afraid to serve on the jury or testify against those skunks. But if anything happened you weren't on the job, Dorman'd turn that trial into the damnedest farce ever come off. And he'd have a strangle hold on the county from then on. His own sheriff, his own judge."

Rod shifted restlessly, flicking a glance toward the dark street. He knew, without Mike's telling him, that Dorman had declared open season on both him and Greg.

Now three of his hard-eyed crew were in jail for having burned down a neighbor's barn. If they slipped out of this charge, there would be no stopping them.

"They won't slip out of it," he said aloud. "Not with Greg swingin' a rope."

Mike looked at him queerly, almost enviously. "You boys have been pards a long time, haven't you?"

Rod twirled his cigarette between his long fingers, staring at the glowing end of it, thinking of Greg. They had met—in a free-for-all fight—when Rod was gangly, fifteen year old range orphan who desperately needed someone to belong to. He could still see Greg's easy grin, hear his friendly drawl: "Come on, kid. I've always wanted a pard."

Greg had been father, mother, brother to him ever since, and Rod idolized the man so much it scared hin He honestly didn't know what he'd do if anything happened to Greg.

He dragged in a deep tight breath as he lifted his gaze to Mike's curious start. "A long time," he said softly.

Rod hadn't realized how tightly strung he was until bootheels sounded on the walk, trailed by the pleasant jingle of spurs, and his big black-headed pardner stepped into the room. Rod cuffed his hat far over one eye, letting himself sag against the bar and grinning with relief. "We'll take those drinks now, Mike."

The trouble hadn't been invented that big Greg Sanderson couldn't handle. His dark face was expressionless, his black eyes, as usual, inscrutable as he leaned his elbows on the bar.

"Find anythin'?" he asked quietly.

"Nary a thing," Rod answered.

"Me neither. Potter and one of his hands are down at Charley's. Otherwise the town's shore empty." Greg's white teeth flashed in a rueful grin at his friend. "Reckon we got all spooked up for nothin'."

"Hope so," Rod said frankly. Then he laughed, clamping an affectionate hand on his pard's shoulder. "Old Dorman's showin' awful good sense, cowboy, keepin' out of your way."

"Huh!" Greg reached for tobacco, his black eyes warmly luminous. "Keepin' out of *our* way," he corrected in a slow drawl. "They're not a damn bit scareder of me than they are of you."

They lifted their glasses, their eyes meeting in a silent toast that brought a faint smile to both faces. Then they drained their drinks and turned toward the door.

The night was black, the moon hidden behind one of several scurrying clouds. The light gleaming in Charley's place two blocks down the street made one bright spot in an otherwise depressingly dark area.

The two men crossed the street, cut between two looming store buildings and, dodging sheds and rubbish, followed along behind business houses as they headed for the jail, a couple of blocks down on a side street.

As they neared the stable behind the darkened hotel, the moon came out, brilliantly illuminating their path, throwing into deeper shadow the areas immediately surrounding the buildings.

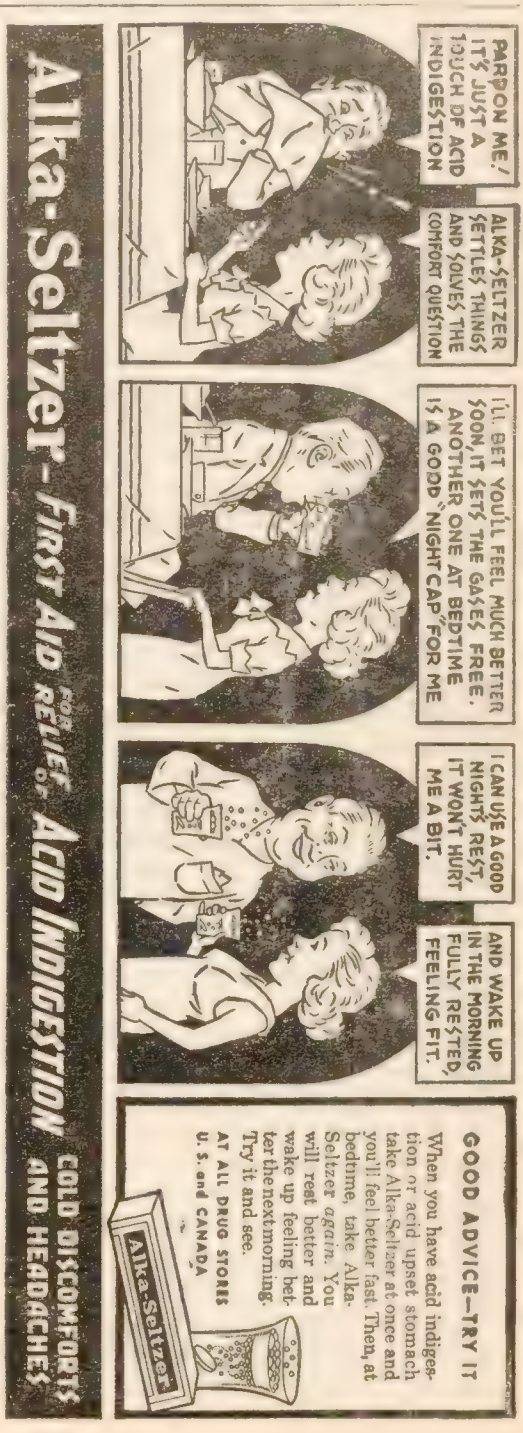
Then it happened. Rod saw the flash of the gun behind the hotel and he heard the bullet strike, a sodden, nerve-jarring blow. He leaped to the side, his gun flashing up, aware that Greg had drawn and was firing even as he fell.

Then the night seemed to explode. Guns were flashing all around them, the crashes blending into one steady roar. Rod fired at two of the flashes, knew he'd hit.

He saw that Greg was down and out, his long body loose and unmoving in the dust. That first bullet must have hit him hard, or he'd been hit again as he fell.

ROD SHEATHED his gun and leaped at Greg, to grab him under the arms and lift him up. Half dragging, half carrying him, he headed for the protection of the stable. A bullet slammed into his side, jerking him around, staggering him, but he kept his hold on Greg, kept moving.

Then he was inside the stable, letting his friend down near the door. He slammed two warning shots through the door, then rolled Greg onto his back, feeling him over to see how badly he was hurt. The front of the man's shirt was soggy.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I CAN USE A GOOD NIGHT'S REST, IT WON'T HURT ME A BIT.
AND WAKE UP IN THE MORNING FULLY RESTED, FEELING FIT.
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AT ALL DRUG STORES U. S. and CANADA
Alka-Seltzer

"God!" Rod breathed in sudden fear. "He's hard hit."

He heard a horse stamping in panic back in a stall, heard bullets thudding into the flimsy walls. Once more he sheathed his gun, thumbing a match for a quick look at his friend. That bleeding had to be stopped.

Greg's face was as gray as stone, his once white shirt smeared with crimson. With a trembling hand Rod grasped the shirt and tore it open, his hard glance fastening on the dark round hole just over the heart. Then he saw something else that froze him. There was no need to stop the bleeding. It had already stopped.

The match flickered out. Rod continued kneeling there, his hand poised in mid air, his chest heaving as cold stark fear washed through him. It wasn't possible.

"Greg!" he whispered hoarsely. "Good God!"

Mike's words plowed heavily across his numbed brain, "Only takes one bullet." But not for Greg. More than once Rod had thought his pard was done for only to have him turn up, staggering and grinning, with two or three bullet holes in him. He had come to feel that the big black-headed guy was indestructible.

Suddenly shaking uncontrollably, Rod lowered his hands, one to his friend's temple, the other to that blood smeared heart. He was oblivious to the crashing guns, to the wracking pain in his side as he listened, felt, for a pulse that just wasn't there. The impossible had happened.

Rod knew it but he wouldn't believe it. He couched there, his eyes staring blankly, his breath coming and going in soundless gasps, his head pounding and ringing with a thousand wild bells. His mind kept repeating that Greg couldn't have been shot through the heart, that he had drawn and fired twice as he was falling. That was the kind of guy Greg was. He never quit.

Rod shook his head savagely. He must have been mistaken. Grabbing his friend by the shoulders, he shook him gently. "Greg!" he called softly. Then he thumbed another match.

The match burned down, died between his seared fingers while full realization swept through Rod and took the heart out of him, leaving in its place a terrible desolation. The fight was over. His pard was dead, and there wasn't anything or anybody else in the world he gave a damn about.

Slowly he climbed to his feet, fighting off a blind dizziness that threatened to down him. The wound in his side seemed suddenly to flare up, to consume him with sickening fire, but he didn't even care about that. All he wanted to do was to get away.

Vaguely he realized that the shooting had died to an occasional sniping shot. Furtive steps sounded near the stable, cloth and leather rustled against the side of the building. They were coming, closing in. Farther away he could hear men shouting, doors slamming. The townsmen were coming, too, but they would be too late. Already too late, he thought bitterly.

Rod O'Neil had been licked before but never before had he admitted it. Now he knew he was all through. He felt helplessly lost, dismally alone. Stumbling and staggering, he felt his way into the stall where the frightened horse pawed at the floor.

The animal was already saddled. Rod led him out and, without a backward glance, dragged himself into the saddle and spurred out the gaping back door.

DAWN found him climbing a rocky ridge under the rim from which he could scan his back trail. Dorman's gunslicks had followed him from town and, knowing he was wounded, had crowded him hard. He'd taken a long circuitous route to get here above Marsh Creek.

Beyond it lay a wild broken country where any man could hide himself, and that's what Rod O'Neil wanted to do.

He pulled his tired horse to a halt and, swaying dangerously in the saddle, turned for one last look over the rolling, pine-studded basin. Five hours of numbing grief had turned his eyes bleak, his jaw gray and rigid. A stubborn will had carried him through the night and he believed now he was safe.

Unless Dorman's men had guessed his direction and taken a short cut trail to swing in ahead of him.

The rumble of Marsh Creek beyond the ridge came to him clearly, promising shade and cold water. He'd rest there awhile, then push on. He didn't know where he was going but it didn't matter. Any trail he took would be barren and meaningless without Greg beside him.

A mile down the creek on a little knoll he could see the buildings of Gil Potter's ranch and just beyond them the new school house. The sun had cleared down there, shining off the freshly peeled logs with a taunting brilliance. It had been Potter's idea, building the school there, because it was near the center of the outlying ranches, those too far out to have access to the town school.

"Someday," he had told the group of family men gathered to build it, "this country's a-gonna grow up and amount to somethin'. When it does, we want our kids to have book learnin' enough to hold their own."

The men had laughed and Gil had flushed painfully. He himself was a newly wed who had, as yet, no children. "I said someday," he reminded them with a grin. "In the meantime the school ma'am can keep my wife comp'ny."

Rod eyed the new building without feeling. They wouldn't be needing schools now that Dorman was due to take over the country, but it meant nothing to him.

He lifted the reins and turned toward the creek, climbing desperately to the pommel as the horse lurched and slipped down the steep hill. He reached the bottom of the canyon wet and panting, the roar of the swift creek filling his ears with a soothing rhythm. Brush was thick here, cutting off his vision, forcing him to concentrate on the thorny limbs he tried painfully to dodge.

He had reached a small clearing at the edge of the creek when his horse spooked violently. The animal whirled, giving Rod just a flashing glimpse of another horse there in the brush before his own horse landed on stiffened front legs.

The jolt was terrific. Rod slapped for his gun, but his side seemed to have ripped apart and a black dizziness swept over him. He realized he was falling, grabbed for the horn. Then he was on the ground, the last of his will power jarred out of him by the fall. They had him now.

He felt hands on his shoulders, rolling him over. Then someone took hold of his arm and started dragging him, and he didn't give a damn. The roar of the creek grew louder, until it was right next to his ear. The dragging ceased and he felt his shirt being torn open.

He wondered vaguely what difference it made how bad the wound was. A man didn't have to be all in one piece to go to hell. Then the wonderful soothing coolness of creek water touched his burning side, and he opened his eyes.

A GIRL knelt beside him, her blond hair flying loosely in the morning breeze, her blue eyes fearfully wide in her pale face. With small trembling hands she tore a strip out of his shirt and folded it into a pad which she dipped in the creek. As she turned back, she saw that he was awake and instantly smiled encouragement.

"You'll be all right," she said, her voice carrying clearly above the creek. "Just lie still till I get this bleeding stopped.

That horse nearly jerked you all apart."

Rod watched her dully, wondering who she was. He thought he knew everyone in that part of the country, but he had never seen her before.

"The wound isn't bad," she told him with quiet cheerfulness. "The bullet glanced off a rib and went around your side." She looked uncertainly at the blood on his shirt and the upper part of his levis and added, "I expect you're pretty weak, though. It's a good thing those darn milk cows took off last night. If I hadn't had to hunt for them, I wouldn't have been up here at this ungodly hour."

"I don't know you," Rod said slowly.

"I'm Martha Evans, the new school teacher at Potter's, but don't let that scare you." She smiled. "I was born and raised on a cow ranch in the northern part of the state. Now if you can lift yourself just a little—"

She had torn the remains of his shirt into strips, which she now passed around his chest, binding them tightly over the cold wet pad.

"That'll hold until we get to the ranch. You can ride that far, can't you?"

"No." Rod moistened his lips nervously. He didn't want to go to Potter's. He didn't want to see anybody he knew. "I'll be all right. You go ahead and find your cows. I'll rest awhile, then ride on."

"There's nobody down at Potter's except me," she said slowly. "I'm looking after the place for them right now. You'll be perfectly safe, and I won't go off and leave you here like this."

There was a note in her voice that forbade argument. Abruptly she rose to her feet and started after his horse.

She helped him on his horse, steadying him while he climbed into the saddle. Then she swung onto her own horse with easy grace and turned down the trail. She found the three milk cows in a brushy pocket she had overlooked on the way up the creek and drove them on into the ranch.

"I'll take care of the horses," she announced as she dismounted at the house. "You come on in and lie down awhile."

Rod was too nearly exhausted to argue with her. He followed her into the neat living room, where he sagged onto a couch near the door and lay back gratefully. He was dimly aware that she lifted his legs up onto the couch. Then he was asleep.

HE AWOKE suddenly, a strange sense of urgency bringing him to a sitting position almost before his eyes were open. Martha Evans leaned her carbine against the wall near the window and turned quickly to put a hand on his shoulder.

"Take it easy," she said calmly. "There's no one here."

Rod stared at her blankly while the events of last night came trooping back across the stage of his feverish mind. He passed a trembling hand over his face, stifling a curse.

A clattering noise sounded outside, and Martha hurried back to the window, one hand reaching out to touch the reassuring gun. Then she uttered a short tight laugh.

"Only the wind flapping that loose tin on the barn roof."

"You're scared," Rod accused, wonderingly.

"Yes." She turned away from the window, smiling ruefully. "Silly, isn't it?"

"No," he said, suddenly harsh, "it's not. Gil shouldn't have left you here alone. Why don't you go into town or over to one of the neighbors until they get back?"

"Gil has four little dogie calves out here. The milk cows won't take them and the little buggers wouldn't eat if I didn't do the milking."

"You'd stay here, scared like that, for the sake of four dogie calves?"

"I promised Gil," she said, seeming surprised at his incredulity. "He's counting on me."

The words stung. Greg had been like that. If he gave his word, he kept it come

hell or flash floods. If he knew someone was counting on him, he did his damnedest to come through. Again Rod passed a hand across his face, closing his eyes tightly against the memory.

"I'll get you some coffee," she said quickly.

She hurried into the kitchen but was back almost immediately with a cup of steaming coffee in one hand and a pint of whiskey in the other. Rod stook a strong drink of the whiskey before starting to sip his coffee, and he could feel the effects at once.

Martha came again from the kitchen with a plate of food—warmed roast meat, potatoes, beans. Rod wasn't hungry but he forced himself to eat part of it. He needed his strength.

Rod shifted uncomfortably. He glanced out the window at the sun, wondering how long he had slept. Not long. Strangely, he felt a sense of relief to find that it was still early in the morning. He wondered if they had taken care of Greg the way they should. He'd be down at the doctor's house—

"It's lovely down here in this basin," Martha said. "I've fallen for it already. Folks here have a wonderful opportunity to develop this country and grow with it. Grand people, too, the ones I've met."

"Some of 'em aren't so nice," Rod said, his voice cold. "I guess you know that."

"That's why I keep the rifle handy." She shook her head slightly in a quick gesture of nervousness and went again to look out the window. "But it's the bad ones who bring out the best in the good ones, don't you know it?"

"It's too bad you came down here," Rod said bleakly, ignoring her remark. "You're in for a dissappointment. They should have told you."

"They did. Gil wrote and said the job might not last, that anything might happen. He said the country wasn't safe right now, and if I was afraid to come he'd release me from that contract we had."

"And you came, anyway? Why?"

"It was too late in the fall for them to find another teacher." Rod made a fierce gesture as if to argue with her, but she cut him off, her voice rising with challenge. "They were depending on me."

ROD FELT a hot flush creep over his face as he lowered his head to stare at the floor. Her words dug into him mercilessly, reminding him that those folks there in town were depending on him, too.

A slow burning shame rose in him, and he was glad Greg couldn't know he'd run out like a whipped coyote. The big man had scoffed when he'd said he wouldn't be worth a damn. "If anybody else is figurin' that way, they're shore figurin' bad."

Miserably Rod dropped his head into his hands. "I've been licked," he muttered thickly. "I'm no good."

"You're never licked till you quit fighting" she told him flatly.

Rod heard her leave the room but he just sat there, letting her words sink in, feeling the terrific pull they exerted. Almost he could hear Greg saying that same thing. Greg never quit.

Suddenly impelled, Rod raised his head to glance out the window at the sun. It was no later than ten o'clock. By taking the short cut trail straight back to town he could make it easily before court opened at two.

He wouldn't live long but that no longer seemed important. He wanted to square himself with Greg. He wanted to take the big fellow's cold hand and tell him he'd do his damnedest to finish the job.

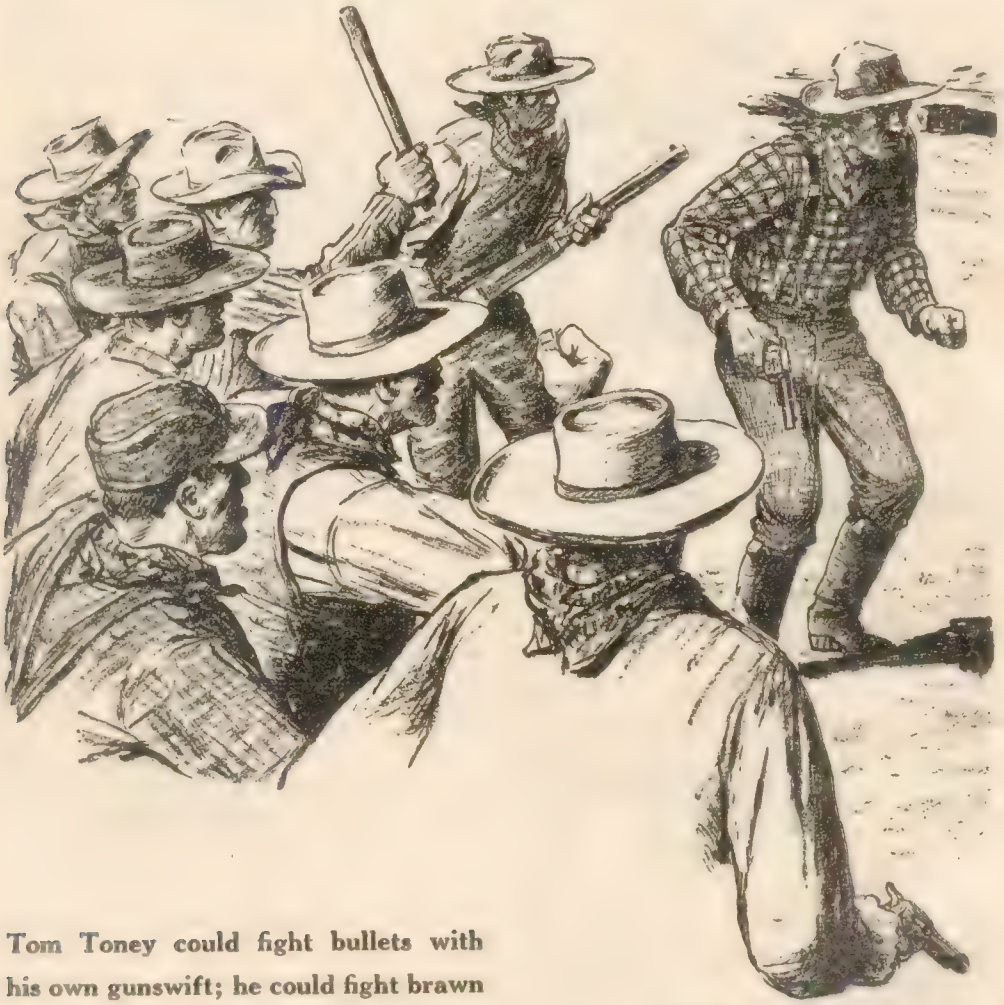
Abruptly Rod stood up, straightening his sore body with a difficulty he found strangely exhilarating. Doorman would undoubtedly win the battle, but he'd have to dig another grave first.

The girl returned to hand him a clean

(Continued on page 128)

LAWLESS TOWN!

By PAUL L. PEIL

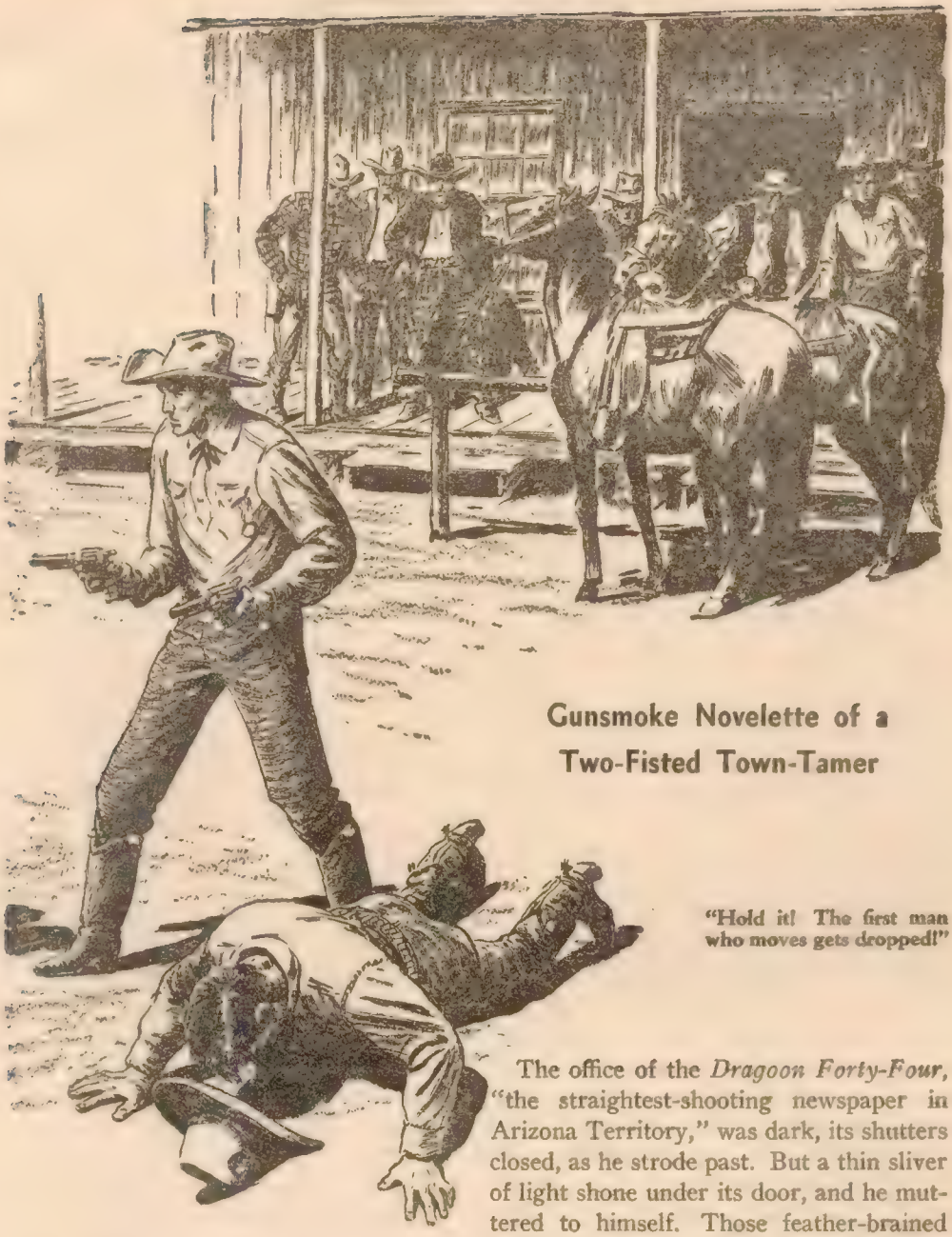


Tom Toney could fight bullets with his own gunswift; he could fight brawn with his own rockhard muscles; but how could he whip an army of vigilante madmen who meant to cut him down in the name of Justice—and the Menifee Midnight-Murder Combine!

CHAPTER ONE

The Committee Wants Action!

TOM TONEY walked through thickening dusk down Dragoon's main street. A tall, lean-loined man, his height was belied by the droop



Gunsmoke Novelette of a Two-Fisted Town-Tamer

"Hold it! The first man who moves gets dropped!"

of his shoulders, as if they were weighted by some invisible burden. The incessant stamp of the reduction mill at town's edge vibrated through his boot-soles. The raucous congestion of the street, even at this supper hour, smote against his ears. And the sights he saw, he liked not at all.

The office of the *Dragoon Forty-Four*, "the straightest-shooting newspaper in Arizona Territory," was dark, its shutters closed, as he strode past. But a thin sliver of light shone under its door, and he muttered to himself. Those feather-brained damn' fools in there, hatching their vigilante scheme—couldn't they realize it only meant more grief?

Dragoon, nestled in its hills of silver, was about ready to boil over, without their agitation.

Slower of step now, he threaded the sidewalk traffic, a man lonely and bitter

and helpless. He told himself again there was nothing he could do. Or rather, nothing that Dragoon wanted him to do. They'd kicked him out of office. Yet, that desperate back-room plotting was not the solution to Dragoon's ills, and he hated to stand by and watch a town he loved busted wide open, gutted and then inevitably flung aside.

He was glad when he reached the Sahuaro Saloon and turned in, getting off the bustling drag. It didn't seem possible a street could change so much. Before the bat-wings had ceased swinging behind him, he paused in his tracks, aware of the saloon's change, also.

It was too crowded, boisterous. Old Tubac Jenkins, its white-haired owner and Tom Toney's closest friend, didn't cotton to this new riff-raff. He always kept his place orderly. Here the old-rock of town, the respectable gentry, could foregather for a nightcap or a friendly game or a bull session. It had the dignity of Seth Ward's bank, flavored with the informality of Pete Devoe's wagon yard.

A pair of miners jostled Toney, as he stood noting the added gambling layouts along the wall, doing a land-rush business. Something was out of jibe. He had to shoulder in at the redwood bar. Instead of slow-moving Tubac and his part-time assistant, there was a battery of fish-eyed, spit-curled bartenders doing duty. With a puzzled frown, Tom ordered.

He was lifting his drink when the crowd around him began shifting, and an odd silence ran over the place. Toney glanced first into the back-bar mirror, then casually put down his glass. He turned around, with his broad back to the bar. Set on hair-trigger, though blanked of expression, he studied the two men approaching.

THEY CAME in tandem, like a master followed by his dog. The foremost man, as poker-faced as Tom, nodded and said, "Evening, Toney." The other said nothing.

He was immaculate in creased trousers, brocaded vest and modified Prince Albert. On the surface he appeared well-fed, smug, but underneath was a ruthless strain so strong it couldn't be layered over. He'd been in Dragoon five months, coming in on the first wave of influx to open the no-limit booze-and-gambling den, the Apache Bar. The strong-arm activities of his lick-spittle gun crew had, in short order, earned for him the title of Boss Menifee.

Toney said nothing. He knew Manifee's type well, was allergic to it. It was the same from the smoky trail towns to the booming strike camps. So he quietly watched the really dangerous member of this pair, the second man who stood behind and aside, staring at him with the direct gaze typical of Indian-blooded people.

Concho Mims was a 'breed, dark of skin, flat-featured. He packed a Colt on one hip, a Bowie on the other. With either, he did Menifee's bidding. About his slouchy garb was much ornamental hammered silver.

Menifee let the pause drag out before he spoke again. "Didn't mean to interrupt your drink, Toney. Tilt her and enjoy her. It's on the house tonight." Without removing his gaze from Toney, he produced a cheroot, then a match which he thumb-nailed into flame. Between draws, as he lit up, he went on, "Of course, hereafter, the Sahuaro will not welcome your patronage."

Tom's lids narrowed. "Howcome?"

Menifee puffed blandly at the cheroot. "Since we unpinned that tin badge from your shirt front, you just squat in your shack and sulk, don't you? You should circulate more, keep up with events. It happens the Sahuaro changed hands today. I'm the new management."

Against the weathered background of his face, Tom's gray eyes flashed as

brightly as the metal discs on Mims' bullhide belt. "You don't say! And where's Tubac? In no alley—*I'm hopin'*—with a knife in his back?"

Concho tensed, and Menifee lifted an eyebrow. "Toney!" Menifee said. "I wonder which will get you salted down first—your long nose or your big mouth. I'm warning you for the last time, quit snapping at my heels!"

Tom Toney leaned back against the bar, his elbows hooked on its edge. His slim fingers were idle, yet poised, inches from the twin guns he wore in Hickok style, butts forward. The scorn of his sudden laughter rang through the hushed room, beat against Menifee.

"You're plain spooky, Menifee. Your kind always is. I'll tell you why. You hate and fear what I represent, honest law and order. Sure, you got me booted out of office, but as long as I'm around, you'll be spooky. I can rally the decent element and exterminate rats like you."

Rage quivered Menifee's voice. "If you can, why don't you?"

Tom shrugged, his answer slow and bitter. "I'm sweatin' this one out. However, sooner or later, Dragoon will come to its senses. The hard way. As for me, I skin my own polecats and buy my own drinks."

Spinning a coin onto the counter, he strode out, stiff-backed.

In eight years he had earned plenty rep, though not much cash, as a gun-fighting Kansas marshal and free-lance lawman. Then a bullet in his lung started it. Specialists cost money. So he was flat broke when he landed, stranded, in this fold of Arizona hills.

THEN TUBAC JENKINS had taken him in charge. Tubac, with a thick leonine mane beginning to silver, with a wisdom of the earth he'd prospected, a patience of the Apaches he'd fought, and a love of life. Tubac had nursed him back to health, physically and mentally, giving him a fresh outlook on life itself. And Tubac had set him up in business again, at the only trade he knew, packing a star.

The town's hilarity, hitting its nightly stride now, didn't improve Toney's mood as he made inquires here, there. It was almost as if Jenkins had disappeared.

Six months ago—it seemed ages instead —Tom had enjoyed his evening strolls. Relaxing in the cool breezes that swept in off the desert, stopping to chat with townsfolk, and then, around nine, tucking the town into bed. Afterward, there was always compensation for his day's labor—sitting in the hammock under a pepper tree with Jean Barclay, or walking in moonlight with her, and bidding her goodnight at the gate. It had been serenity.

Overnight it had all changed, thanks to the discovery of silver, the advent of

"PIN-WORMS may be A FAMILY AFFAIR"

Fidgeting, nose-picking and a tormenting rectal itch are often telltale signs of Pin-Worms . . . ugly parasites that medical experts say infest *one out of every three* persons examined. Entire families may be victims and not know it.

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a spur railroad, and Menifee. The sleepy range village became wild and uncurried, a counterpart of the many boomers that he'd witnessed in his tumbleweed past. It sickened him, yet he knew it could have been worse.

As a gun-doctor, he had administered to towns chronically ill. Here he was on the job first, thus able to diagnose and prescribe before the patient got far advanced. He'd done just that—iron-handedly, by his own admission—but for two months, while the population doubled, trebled, he kept a fair semblance of order. Then—

The figure emerged from the doorway of the darkened *Forty-Four,* saying, "Wait, Tom." He halted, involuntary and reluctant, not even glancing toward it. In the street's mottled light she was slim of form, quick of movement without being fluttery for one so small.

Reaching Tom's elbow, she continued, "We've got it organized, Tom." Her throaty contralto always held him, lilting through him. "You must join us. The members want you to take over."

Tom shook his head. "I told you before, Jean, I'll have nothin' to do with it. It's outside the law."

"Law! What law? The Menifee brand, with Dude Ormond enforcing?"

Tom now gave her the full impact of his bitter regard. "It's the brand they wanted when they pulled me out of saddle. And as I recall, the *Forty-Four* also tub-thumped for my removal."

"That's not true, Tom. As editor, I presented both sides. I did say that you were too stubborn to even discuss the problem, to iron out differences with the other side. It had a viewpoint, and there can be a middle of the road policy, if people seek it."

Tom sighed. "No, Jean. That is compromise, and you can't do it with men like Menifee. You're either for or against such types."

She moved slightly, laying her fingers on his arm, and her voice was weary. "I'm against now, Tom, but I was neutral then. There *is* such a thing. My father published unbiased papers in a dozen places—Creede Camp, Tombstone, the tough nuts—and he never took sides."

"Maybe," said Tom Toney, "he never stayed in a town long enough to love it, as I have Dragoon."

Jean stiffened, stepped back. "And still you won't fight for it! You— Well, join or not, you'll see this committee means action. We made a mistake, an honest one, and we intend to correct it."

"Fine." Tom nodded. "If you're ready, you can start now. Here comes your faithful servant of the star."

CHAPTER TWO

Get Out of Town!

DUDE ORMOND was shorter than Toney by several inches, but better filled out. His San Fran Stetson, set rakishly on his brindle-thatched bead, was a dove gray. His shirt, with a double-breasted overlap, was of the same tone, tailored to fit the taper of his torso. His pearl-handled Colts hung from a black busky, saddle-stitched in white. Oregon pants were tucked inside his bench-made boots.

There was an odd grin on his shadowy face as he joined them. He wasn't drunk, neither was he sober. Tom knew he imbibed freely with all his back-slapping friends. Touching his hat brim to Jean, Ormond drawled, "Howdy, neighbors. This is luck, catching both of you together."

His presence set off an electric field that pulsed around them in waves of dislike, friction. It was hostility, yet strangely not hatred. Tom's feelings toward this vain lawman and Menifee were different. Ormond could be ignored; not so Menifee.

Before Ormond spoke again, a disturbance upstreet, in the vicinity of the Sahuaro, attracted their attention. It was a raucous crescendo of sound, with men ganging up. Then a dwindling of noise, above which could be heard someone saying: "Marshal—down yonder."

A brawny miner came along the walk, trailed by others. He was hatless, mussed up, and blood from a nasty scalp wound smeared one side of his face. In his calm, measured tread was something dangerous, and anger held in restraint. Reaching Ormond, he said,

"Them new tinhorns at the Sahuaro took me in with a cold deck, Marshal. When I caught 'em, they whupped me with a pistol an' bum's-rushed me outside."

Ormond's gaze flicked over him, insolent with scorn. "You're lucky. Someone usually gets drilled in that sort of brace." He gestured with a hand. "I'll look into it later." He shifted his attention to Toney and Jean.

Tom saw the man tense at Ormond's dismissal of the affair. "How about now, Marshal? I go on th' night shift soon."

Ormond twisted toward him, his contempt plain. "I'm busy. Why don't you moles stay in your holes, if you have to be watch-dogged all the time? You knew the game when you bought chips."

The miner shook his head slowly, and Tom sensed the deadliness building up within him. "I didn't know ol' Tubac had sold. I'm a peaceable man, never play in Menifee's joints. I don't use a gun 'less'n I have to." He wrenched off two buttons of his flannel shirt, revealing the gun inside his waistband.

"I'll get back my losses, Marshal." He half-pivoted to leave, then thoughtfully added, "We've give you th' benefit of a doubt. We been stingareed, roughed up, preyed on. Maybe it all ain't late enough for you to look into yet. But I reckon we know whose brand you wear."

Ormond jumped forward, seizing him by shirt front. He pulled back, a hand wrapping around the belt gun. Ormond snapped, "Draw that pea-shooter, you damn two-bit mucker, and I'll wrap it around your thick skull. Get this: I don't wear anybody's brand!"

He released his hold, and the miner stared at him, long, baleful. He said, "You're buyin' y'self a pack of grief, Ormond."

He went up the street with his companions. They were a grim group, lost in traffic before they reached the Sahuaro. Ormond watched them fascinatedly, and in that moment his youngish countenance seemed strained, old. Facing the pair, he said lamely, "They'll cool off, won't do anything rash."

Under their joint stare he found it hard to recover his aplomb. He took an offensive. "I've been hearing about the vigilante deal you two are cooking up. I'll warn you not to try it."

Tom Toney said flatly, "Don't bristle up at me, Ormond. You got enough trouble. Don't beg for more. To ease your mind however, Dragoon's house-cleanin' is no matter of mine."

"Don't hand me that." Dude Ormond laughed nervously. "You're the sorehead behind it all. Folks 've cut you loose. Why don't you drift? No, you hang around, breeding trouble. You and that miner are two of a kind—can't stand the gaff. If you thought so much of this sand-blown dump, you'd back me up. We might make this a fair town." He looked sarcastically at the girl. "If we could keep females from meddling in men's affairs, make them stay at home where they belong."

Jean Barclay stood alone, touching them both with her scathing glance. "A home calls for a man. I haven't found one yet, just excuses. You're fortunate, Mr. Ormond, that I am bound by a lady's handicaps. If my father were alive, the

Forty-Four would blast you with everything it had!"

TONEY SUDDENLY felt sorry for the man. There was an odd sincerity to his twisted viewpoint, a sort of helpless hope. And while he stood smarting from Jean's retort, Toney said,

"Our definitions of law and order conflict, Ormond. You look down at people. I've always tried to look up. We couldn't pull together. There's been more crime here in one month than in my six years as marshal. I'm not sayin' you're a Menifee dummy. Dunno, don't care. But your style certainly fits in with his town bossin'."

"You forget this is a boomer now. These men work hard, play hard. They want things wide open. It pays off in prosperity, doesn't it?"

Tom shrugged. "To Menifee's kind, yes. They kill a town and pick it to a skeleton."

Above the din of revelry, from the direction of the Sahuaro Saloon, came a single gun shot. Quickly it was followed by a series of staccato reports. Dude Ormond's expression was pained as he met Toney's steady stare. He opened his mouth, as if to speak, but when he didn't, Tom said, "I'd bet odds that our miner collected lead, instead of money."

Ormond exclaimed, "The damn fool!" He slewed around, went trotting toward the saloon.

Tom glanced at Jean, who'd come close to press against him. She was shivering, her gaze fixed upstreet. He put an arm around her shoulder, and she said, "Shootings, killings. We're sick of it, Tom. Please reconsider. Nobody's lost confidence in you, as you think. We need and want you."

"Then have the town council oust Ormond and appoint me properly. It will be legal that way."

"You know they refuse to act. Those who aren't bought off by Menifee have the cold shakes of him."

"I'm sorry, Jean." She moved away from him, and he tried to bridge the gap. "Close shop and let me walk you home."

She said, "I have more work to do. Good night."

She entered the office. He stood a long moment on the quiet street, feeling sick inside, utterly spent, and finally trudged on. By the time he came to his one-room adobe on Dragoon's outskirt, the carousal back in town had resumed its normal raucous pitch.

HE SLEPT fitfully, and was up and about early. The weight of his troubled thoughts was heavier than ever. It was around mid-morning, as he lounged in his yard, that he saw the rolling dust cloud on the flat's horizon and watched it resolve into a rig. When it cut off the road and came spinning toward him, he bounded forward, grinning broadly.

Instead of slowing down, the white-haired, moon-faced oldster at the reins shook up the team, wheeling past Tom, missing him by inches. He made a circle of the yard, plainly showing off, before he drew up. Beaming at Tom, he indicated the outfit with a proud gesture.

"How you like it, younker?"

Toney appraised the sturdy yellow buggy and the pair of buckskin trotters. "I've always liked it, Tubac. It's some class. And you can't fool me—it's Josh Riley's range buggy."

"Was," Tubac corrected, as he stiffly climbed out. He was a heavy-set man, remarkably active for his age. It struck Tom, forcibly, how that age relentlessly crept upon one, taking its toll. Didn't seem right in Tubac Jenkin's case. "I allus admired that combination, so I dickered Josh out of it."

Tom rolled a wheatie. "You got any need for it?"

"Might. You heard that I sold out

yesterday?" Tom nodded, and they walked over to the 'dobe wall, hunkering down with their backs against it. "Well, younker, shadows are lengthenin' for me, an' I hanker to gad a bit before I cash in. Revisit places, rest. Take a gander at Californy, sit in th' sun an' watch th' ocean."

"Dragoon," Tom said reflectively, "wouldn't be the same without you."

Tubac smiled appreciatively. "I reckon it would. It ain't th' same anyway. No, younker, life is funny. It changes, adjusts, keeps on goin'." He fumbled and produced a bulky wallet from his hip pocket, opened it for Tom to observe the thick sheaf of green backs inside.

"Y'know, Menifee near shocked me out of my wits. Offered me a bonanza price, plus a good-will bonus. Not gittin' any younger, an' too stove up to fight his foul kind of competition, I unloaded." His knee cracked as he shifted a leg. "Say, why don' you tag with me? We'll travel in style, get a change of scenery."

Tom Toney didn't answer. Squatting there, listening to Dragoon's discord, he felt the emptiness of his existence. He rose, walked around without aim, and finally came back to Tubac.

"Change of scenery?" He repeated the oldster's words thoughtfully, and shook his head. "That's not what I want. For one thing, it'd be quittin'. When I came here, Tubac, I knew what it meant to kick about from pillar to post. To be lonely, to crave peace instead of violence. I'd given up hope. Then you showed me a new life. I found things I could love—people, the land, friendships. I've put down roots that are awfully hard to pull up."

CHAPTER THREE

Freeze-Out

THEY RODE uptown at noon, behind the matched trotters. The main stem seethed. This was an around-the-clock camp. Tubac slowed and they watched a puncher and a miner slugging away. A pair of Rafter A hands emerged from the Apache Bar, supporting a drunken saddlemate between them. A Menifee gunnie sat on the arcaded gallery, picking his teeth.

Tubac spat. "Menifee's ridin' for a fall. Th' ranchers an' th' mine owners had a confab last night. They're riled over th' rough stuff goin' on."

Tom was moodily silent until they sat at a table in the busy High Grade Cafe. "It don't stack up, somehow," he mused. "Why should Menifee buy you out, at a whoppin' price, when he could freeze you out?"

With a mouth full of food, the other grunted, shrugged. His plate was clean, Tom's hardly touched, when they pushed back chairs and got up. Extracting a bill from his hefty wallet, Jenkins paid as they left.

The moment they stepped outside, the deadly tension of the street hit them like cold water thrown in their faces.

The scene was still as a photograph: men frozen on the walks, no vehicular traffic. In the middle of the street stood a sizeable group of miners, staring up its length. They were armed, some with clubs, one with a long-tom rifle. Out front, obviously their leader, was a big fellow in corduroy, whose appearance reminded Tom of someone. When the fellow turned his head, once, Tom tabbed the resemblance.

Abruptly a lone figure came into sight, striding down the street. He had a jaunty, contemptuous air, his San Fran hat cocked on his brindle mane. Half a dozen yards from the burly leader, he halted. In the pause before he addressed the man, his dark-eyed glance ran over the set-up, calm, measuring.

And Tom thought, Show-off or not, Dude Ormond, you got nerve. You got big nerve.

Ormond said, "I hear you're hunting me, Barton."

"Damn tootin' I am!"

"You always have a pack at your back?"

Barton growled. "Hell, no! They came on their own accord. I don't need no help to put an end to your rotten star-packin'! When you let my kid brother walk to his death in Menifee's den last night, your color panned out. Your law's done, an' so are you."

He started advancing, slow, dogged. A low rumble came from the miners as they spread out in bestial anticipation. Ormond had stiffened, yet not moved.

"Hold on, Barton! You're losing your head, like he did. I—hell, I regret that shooting." Even in this moment of duress he couldn't submerge his barbed sarcasm. "You can't expect me, one man, to nursemaid every jasper who goes haywire over a losing streak."

"Losing streak?" Barton checked up, to laugh harshly. "That's what we been up ag'inst ever since Menifee took over these diggin's an' brought you in to front it. We've had enough."

Dude Ormond's countenance was a study in surprise, incredulity. "If I ran a Sunday School town, you'd all squawk. I've tried to give you what you wanted, Barton."

"What we want—an' aim to git—is a place where we can have an honest fling." He resumed his advance. "Th' card sharps, th' gun thugs, th' babes who roll you for your money, an' th' crooked law—they're through!"

There was only a few feet interval between them now, and Tom watched Ormond intently. In him was a strange, indefinable sympathy for the latter. As peace officers, they subscribed to opposite, clashing theories, still he hated to see Ormond's convictions burst so violently in his face.

Ormond cried, "Barton!" He began retreating. His expression was panicky as he grasped at his Colt handles, but didn't draw.

"Jehosaphat!" Tubac snorted. "He's done cracked!"

Tom held his breath. Closing the gap, Barton had seized the marshal, was grappling with him. Ormond's boots churned up ashy dust as the powerful miner mauled him about a small area. In unconscious reflex, Ormond dragged his guns, lashing out feebly with one. Barton wrenched it from him, savagely striking back with it.

Ormond, dodging the full impact, went down. Barton drove a knee into his face, and he doubled in agony, face almost touching the ground. Tom winced as Barton's blunt boot-toe lined out, and Dude sprawled in a twisted heap, groaning and trying to lift himself.

A roar rose from the ring of hard-rock men. "Stomp his brains out!" "Finish him, Bart, so's we can git to Menifee an' his dives!"

TOM TONEY instinctively whipped his gaze to the Apache Bar. He saw the soild rank of gunmen lining the gallery, studied the tense figure of Concho Mims, the silver of his garb winking sunlight.

He saw something else also: gunsmoke and blood and broken bodies, in a setting that he loved, that should be peaceful. For too long had he preserved that peace, and now he reacted explosively, plunging forward.

In long strides he reached Barton, who was bending over Ormond. With a mighty heave he yanked and spun the miner away. In the same instant his Frontier .44's had jumped into his fists. Caught faster than comprehension, the mob found itself menaced by the steady twin barrels.

In taut suspense, while sounds wheezed off into bewildered silence, Tom covered them. There were gun-metal gray glints

in his eyes as he said, flat and toneless:

"It's gone far enough, fellows. Break it up." And when they hesitated, a score baffled by one man, he added. "I'll not tell you twice. Call my hand if you wish, but Barton will take a slug between his eyes. You, fat shorty, will get another button hole in that red shirt. And you, bucktooth boy, I'll blast that grin off your face!"

It crystallized their decisions. They dispersed.

Without relaxing his guard, Tom listened to Barton say, "So that's how th' assay runs on you, Toney. We'd heard you was square, wondered why you got kicked out of office. Now it's clear. You're a Menifee rat, too. You better pack an' travel. It's showdown."

White-lipped, Tom watched him stalk off. He was suddenly conscious that Dude Ormond was gone. He saw him staggering along a far walk. And as he watched, Jean Barclay appeared, moving to Ormond's side, taking him by an arm. Once she looked beyond him, straight at Toney. There was a half-smile on her lips. Because of the distance, Tom couldn't read whether it was approval or scorn.

Morose and bitter, he stared at the crumpled San Fran hat in the dusty street —a street in which he stood alone.

Even Tubac Jenkins didn't understand. "I don't blame you, younker. Th' mouthy tin-badge was gittin' a short-card deal."

Tom didn't attempt to explain.

Tubac hitched at his britches, declaring. "I know I'm goin' to Californy. Hell's due to pop here. Ormond's been thrown from his high horse. He'll fade away to other parts. Menifee's kind can never see th' handwritin' on th' wall. Ain't nary a thing to stop th' rancher-miner combine from cleanin' their plow. Me, I'm too dangnabbed old to be in th' midst of such a mess! You better decide to come along."

Dragoon's sullen hostility was a thing of substance, closing in around Tom as he clumped homeward. Jeffries, from his saddle shop doorway, eyed him coldly. That didn't matter to Tom, but the fact that the little man had belted on a big Colt did. He knew Jeffries couldn't use it worth a damn.

He tried to feel indignant. When he'd worn the star, no townsman had been obliged to strap on hardware. He thought of California—could a fellow sink roots there? How much of him would he leave behind here? In his 'dobe, he hunted up his battered old telescope valise.

All afternoon Dragoon was ominously quiet. The three o'clock mine shifts didn't beeline into town as usual. It was around the supper hour when they began trickling in, solemn punchers in twos and threes, grave groups of miners. Tom stood in his portal and, with a sense of futility, observed it. He'd done little when he spiked the premature opening guns. This was it. Ormond's downfall had set the stage.

It occurred to him that if Menifee no longer had any law buffer, or any prestige of law to lean upon, neither was there any to hamstring him in his course of action. Because it was innate with him, he had respected Ormond's star, for what it should represent.

He drew his .44's absently inspecting them. What could he do? Stick his neck out again, and get it wrung this time? They couldn't understand his motives. To them, he was either on one side or the other, and they were in the mood to include him in the clean-up anyway.

Why be foolish? Menifee's crooked paths didn't cross Toney's. He'd been a peace officer too long. Let the other man look out for himself. He thrust the Colts in his holsters.

CHAPTER FOUR

Powdersmoke Pattern

AT THE slap-slap of running feet in the yard, he spun nervously. A beet-faced, overstuffed figure appeared on the

threshold, resting momentarily against the frame, panting. Kirk, proprietor of the Dragoon Hotel, was a phlegmatic person, and Tom wondered what could stir him like this.

Kirk said excitedly. "Toney, come down to the hotel, quick!"

Tom's irritation was sarcastic. "Why? Trouble?"

Kirk nodded. "It's awful!"

Tom grunted. "It's a hard habit to break, isn't it, Kirk?"

"What you mean?"

"Callin' on me when trouble breaks. Tell Dragoon I'm not interested. I'm a busted flush. You folks are too finicky. I couldn't please you, nor could Ormond. But now that he's slunk off, whipped, you're willin' to call on me for chores."

Kirk straightened with resentment. His jaws snapped. "I'm sorry if I bothered you, Toney. I figured this was personal and you'd appreciate my coming to you before I summoned the new marshal, that's all." He swung his bulk from the entrance.

"Hold on, Kirk!" Tom cried, springing after him. "What new marshal?"

Kirk, in the yard, said over his shoulder, "Concho Mims, appointed this afternoon." He hurried off in a waddling trot.

Premonition coursing through him in chill waves, Tom snatched his hat and followed hot on Kirk's heels.

They seemed to be the only moving objects on the street. Tie-rails were bare, boardwalks empty. Stores were shuttered, despite the day's dying heat. From the respectable Cochise Casino a cowboy and a miner peered over the bat-wings. From inside the saloon came the low buzz of voices. The sound had a deadly, implacable quality.

They turned in at the hotel, mounting to the second floor. At the lower end of a corridor, a murmuring crowd was banked before a room door. A clerk barred entry, and as they shoved through, complete silence laid hold.

Tom Toney entered the room alone, his face suddenly the color of chalk. He stared, with an inarticulate unbelief, at the sprawled form on the floor. Kneeling beside it, with his first touch he knew rigor mortis had set in, yet lifting the white-haired head, he held it tenderly in his arms. Grimly then, he lifted the body and deposited it almost gently on the nearby bed.

A few feet from where the body had lain, there was a dull concave object on the worn carpet. He bent, examined it, pocketed it. In a far corner he found the familiar wallet, flat as a fritter.

He stood at length, thinking, his gray eyes slitted, pain on his features. He'd been a fool to believe that Menifee's rotten stench didn't reach his nose. Every honest man smelled it.

The crowd was murmuring again, as he listened to Kirk explain: "The murderer must've slipped in the back way while we were downstairs, moving some furniture against the front windows. He muffled the report somehow, I figure. Shot so close it scorched Tubac's shirt. Couple hours ago, don't you reckon? Soon as I discovered the body, I went for you, Toney."

Tom nodded blankly, muttered thanks, and walked from the room. In the lobby below he encountered Jean Barclay. She came and stood before him, a slim and sympathetic figure in the wan light, but unyielding also.

"Let's sit down and talk, Tom. Tubac Jenkins was everybody's friend, so we all share in the grief. That doesn't mean we should be rash or imprudent. Before this night is over, justice will be rendered. The pattern is already laid out."

Tom said, "I have a simpler pattern, Jean." Hitching at his holster tops, he stepped around her.

THE APACHE BAR was a monstrosity, even in this mushrooming makeshift town. It had a frame second story

on a 'dobe lower structure. Inside it was big, more utilitarian than ornate, with a game wing and private rooms that opened onto a balcony that extended the width of the rear wall.

It was deserted, except for two persons, when Tom Toney walked in. This pair sat at a card table—Menifee engrossed with a spread of solitaire, Concho Mims idling with a shot glass and a quart bottle. Menifee raised his eyes, held them in casual appraisal of Toney. The slouch snapped out of Mims' posture and he came to stiff attention, both hands dropped to his sides as he stared, unblinkingly solemn.

Menifee dropped his gaze, turned three cards, playing one. He said pleasantly, "A bit early for service, Toney. Our night trade may be late. Incidentally, I want to thank you for your timely intervention today. That affair would have been regrettably nasty otherwise."

Tom grunted expressively. "You accused me of squattin' in my shack and not knowin' what went on. I'll return that compliment. You don't know when a hand is overplayed, do you?"

Menifee peeped at a face-downer. "You mean that vigilante stew? It's bad for business, but all boom camps have hot flashes of righteousness. They recover easy."

Tom said, "Stand up, Concho."

Concho blinked. "What th' hell?"

With his glance on Toney, Menifee said, "Stand up, Concho."

Reluctant, puzzled, Concho obeyed. For a moment that ran on and on, Tom studied him. Canting his head to the right, then to the left, finally Tom shook it emphatically. Concho's reptilian stare clung to the ex-marshal. His swarthy face had an oily shine. Suspense wrapped around him.

"Wanted to see how that badge hung," said Tom at last. "I knew tin wouldn't look good on an hombre who likes silver so much." He produced the round object from his shirt pocket, held it up between finger tips. "Here's some you lost. Third stud left of your belt buckle. Well, 'breed, don't you want to know where I found it? Beside a dead man—"

The giveaway flashed in Mims' eyes. As he went for his gun, Toney flipped the choncho at him. Mims got off the first shot, but it was wild. After that, Tom's slug was whirling him around, a complete turn that X-crossed his legs. He tottered, as if trying to unwind himself before he went down. The concho, having struck him in the face to be deflected onto the table top, now rolled off and fell metallically on the floor beside him.

Boss Menifee hadn't moved. With iron control he sat poker-faced, eyes fixed upon Tom. He coughed once from a drift of burnt powder. In each temple a pulse jumped visibly. Only by the dulled edge of his voice did he betray his rattled reflex. He asked, "Mind telling me the reason for that?"

Toney's answer was delayed. He stood with gaze lifted slightly, shuttling along the rear balcony. Men filled it, emerging from the private rooms. Men with cocked scatter-guns—house-men, bouncers, all of Menifee's gunnies. The empty trap did have some teeth.

Without looking in their direction, Menifee said, "That's a reception committee in case any of those blue-bellied reformers try their luck. Which I hope they do. Get the issue settled, and the mess cleaned up before tonight's business." He grinned at Tom, a bland smirk. "What were you about to say?"

Tom studied him. With anyone else but Menifee, such supreme confidence, audacity would have been ridiculous. Tom could understand. He himself had been blind to reality until it was a belated disaster. The grin he gave back to Menifee was offset by the Colt still gripped in his hand.

He nodded toward the balcony. "You

plan things ahead. That's why you were so generous with Jenkins, your competitor. You had a gun-dog waitin' your command to fetch back the money. Right?"

IT BROUGHT no admission from Menifee, but momentarily the shades flew up from his eyes and there was bared an uncertainty, or fear. He looked involuntarily toward his hirelings, to gain reassurance.

"I don't know what you mean, Toney, so I won't jump at conclusions. I think you and I could get together. Dragoon needs another town-tamer now. You got a raw deal. If you believe I was responsible, I can make amends, pin the badge on you again. And being aware a man can't do much on a marshal's pay, I'll match it. Under the table, of course, as Dragoon might not understand. You'd be worth it." He gestured, genuinely nervous, at the gun. "Pouch that thing, Tom. How about it?"

Tom Toney's grin broadened as he swung the Colt dead-level on the gambler. "You're a fool, Menifee. I'm goin' to do what I came here to do—*kill you*. All your trigger men can't stop me before I do it. After that, I don't care. You can't sabe that, can you?"

The big saloon interior was still as death. As though on a shuttered photoplate, all movement was frozen. Faintly, from the stamp mill on the hill outside, came the ceaseless thud-thud. And then, with some spine-tingling coincidence, even that went silent.

Boss Menifee's face was blanched. His lips twitched as truth hit him.

And with jarring impact, a new voice abruptly spoke up: "Menifee!"

Dude Ormond stood in the rear door, at the end of the long mahogany bar, under the overhang of balcony. There was a lounging indolence about him. With a shoulder against the frame, a queer-set smile about his mouth, he had both his Colts out, idly tripping them, up and down, by trigger guards.

That much Tom saw with a flit of his glance, which he snapped back to Menifee. The latter had lifted from his chair, his torso twisted as he stared. His tensed fingertips touched the table top. He seemed afraid to raise up fully, reluctant to sit again.

On the balcony the hoodlums stirred, carefully.

Ormond said, "I'm glad I heard that offer, Menifee. Some fellows, me in particular, learn the hard way. I've been playing up your crooked alley, but it was through my own ignorance. You've never slapped your bribe brand on me, have you?"

Menifee wet his lips, slow to reply. From the world outside, remote at this moment, a mine whistle gave a series of toots that sheered the quiet.

"Damn you," rapped Ormond. "Answer!"

Menifee said, "I didn't have to buy you."

"I wanted that for the record, Tom." He came along the bar now, so casual it was sublime. Halting beyond Toney, he regarded the henchmen above. "You gunhawks get a warning you hardly deserve. This isn't the push-over that Menifee thinks. Dragoon, not a mere handful of reformers, is on the prod. Men or towns can be exploited so far, no more. Speaking for the vigilantes, I can tell you nobody's walking into this trap. They have the place surrounded, mean to burn it down. You can surrender, or stay and roast. C'mon, Tom, let's give 'em time to talk it over with Menifee."

He began backing toward the bat-wings. Long hesitation held Tom Toney as he faced the immobile gambler boss. Then weariness flooded through him, crumbling his cold, dry fury. He said, "How can you kill a snake, if it won't strike?" He began backing also.

They were almost to the lattice doors when Menifee acted. He was like a spring, tautly wound, suddenly snapping. He came erect, a hand flashing inside his coat to a hide-out.

For ear-splitting seconds, gun concussion tore the saloon apart. One shotgun hardcase hurtled over the balcony railing. Another rolled limply down the staircase. And Boss Menifee gradually slid down the surface of the overturned table.

IN THE SWING doors Ormond paused to call, "Be sensible, boys. Shuck your hardware and file out."

Toney yanked him outside. A mine whistle cut loose. It was tied down, blasting the air. Sprinting, the two ex-lawmen crossed the street, sprawled themselves behind a watering trough. Toney's head revolved, and sheepish surprise was mirrored on his face. He shouted in Ormond's ear, "Hell, nobody's got that place surrounded!"

"No, but you were." Dude grinned. He looked up the street, pointed. "It was timed about right, after all." The whistle ceased, but he continued to shout. "There they come. It's clean-up now."

They had a ringside seat for what followed, and it seemed incredible. As if rehearsed, men poured from the Casino, the *Forty-Four* and other sources. Converging upon the Apache Bar, they halted at its entrance. At the same time the Menifee tribe was coming out, with hands elevated.

It was round-up, bloodless, simple.

Toney squatted there at length while relief anointed his soul. Still, hurts remained, hurts hard to heal. He'd done his best, whether others—she, specifically—understood or not. His way had prevented mob lust.

Beside him, Ormond said humbly, "Tom, I'd like to be your deputy. You'll need one. I had the wrong slant on things. You've shown me a different way."

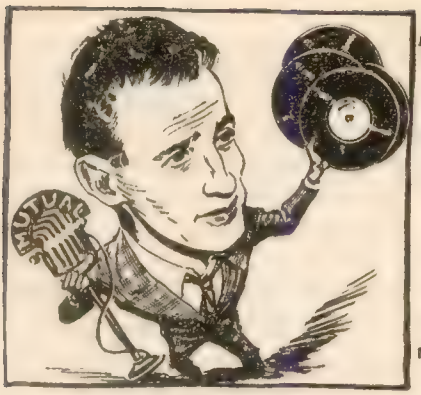
Tom looked at him, yet saw old Tubac. And the "wrong slant" and "different way" was familiar. He'd told it to Tubac once. What was it the oldster had said this morning? Life changed, adjusted, kept going? Here he had acquired a protege, just like Tubac six years ago.

He swallowed hard. "I reckon we've both been extreme in our ideas, younker. Shucks, I'm not marshal any more."

"Wait and see. I was it in name only, for a while. Folks thought they wanted a change. See if they don't come to you now." Tom was reflectively silent, until Dude nudged him. "Look, chief. What did I tell you? Here they come, hang-dog as all get-out. Don't be too rough on 'em."

Tom Toney lifted his glance to the group that was approaching. In its van was a slim, petite figure. He held his breath, for he'd never seen her appear so flustered or fluttery. She contained herself as long as possible, and when brusquely she broke loose and ran to him, he rose up to meet her.

THE END



BOB POOLE'S SONG CORRAL

Star of "Poole's Paradise," Heard Every Day Over MUTUAL NETWORK

WELL, HOWDY my little victims, and how you be? I trust that after these many days and weeks you just couldn't wait until you went out and bought this magazine to read this-here column called *Bob Poole's Song Corral.* For those who are just turning this way for the first time this is an educational feature on stuff and things and your author is Poole, spelled backward is Eloop.

Now that preliminary introductions are over with, let's get on to our first subject which is the bird. I see that the largest bird that ever existed was the elephant bird of Madagascar which sometimes grew to be eleven feet tall. How would you like one of those for a little feathered pet around the house?

I think a little eleven foot bird would be a lot of company for you, and think of what a banquet your cat could have off one of them. Now what else should I elucidate on? Oh, yes, did you know that penguins swallow stones in order to enable them to dive for their food? You see, this helps them adjust their hydrostatic balance —whatever that is. If they lose a little natural weight, they make up for it by swallowing stones.

End of text.

• • •

Red Gillam & His Western Jazz Band have a thumping Dixieland rendition of the oldie *Columbus Stockade Blues.* The band employs the classic horn-tram-clary-rhythm backing, which makes the number more of a two-beat jazz piece than country. But it moves just the same. *Corn Pone Stomp* is the other side which is the melody of the popular *Sugar Foot Stomp.* Both sides are well rounded. I forgot to mention the label which is MERCURY.

• • •

Did you ever stop to think just how many songs, poems, and books have been written about love? Just about everybody has a different definition or interpretation of what love means. Like somebody once wrote: Love is what makes the world go around. Another fellah came

along and wrote right under that saying: Yeah, and that's why we're all so dizzy. Maybe he's got something there.

• • •

Well, Cowboy Copas has something here, in a new King recording of *The Postman Just Passes Me By*. Cowboy really goes all out on this tune and it should be a big seller. The other side is almost as good. It's called *The Road of Broken Hearts*.

• • •

Shorty Warren and his Western Rangers (LONDON) one of the up-and-coming combos, recorded a cute novelty that's going to be played for some time. It's called *I Thought She Was a Local, (But She Was Only a Fast Express)*. Shorty's arrangement is so effective that one name band tried to copy the same effect but missed. This record could go.

• • •

Did you know that your name meant something? Your last name, that is. It was associated centuries ago with some trade or profession. For example, I think the name Smith might have started from someone who was a blacksmith. That might not be right but you get the idea. I was just wondering what kind of racket the first Poole was in. If it didn't have that E on the end there, I'd surmise that one of my ancestors opened up the first billiard parlor.

My pappy-in-law, who is on a trip to Europe, wrote me recently that there are a lot of Poole's in England. Maybe that's why we're having to loan the British Government so much money to support the Poole's that are on relief over there. Just like it is over here, ain't it?

But that name business is fascinating, you know. Why don't you look yours up some day and see how it started?

• • •

My brother Al recently blew into town. I do mean blew in! What a big wind he is. I'm just a mild breeze compared to him. You see, he's from Texas and he certainly lets you know it. Well, now I love Texas and the Texas people and I'm an honorary citizen of that great state myself, but the night he came in I had to listen for four solid hours about Texas. I could write now about the whole history of this state.

He claims everything good comes from Texas. He says, "You know when you put ice cream on your pie, well, that started in Texas. We call it pie Alamo." — And then he started to sing, *On the Alamo*. What a character!

But he gave what he considered a high compliment. He said this column is like a Texas steer. And I asked him what he meant. He said, a point here and a point there and a lot of bull in between!

• • •

Billy Bell & his Ridge Wranglers new side for ATLANTIC is a sad tale well warbled called *Making Excuses for You*. It's done with a lot of heart and I think the tune will get a lot of plays. The other side is *Cannonball Yodel* which is an up-tempo train song well yodeled by Billy Bell.

• • •

Here's a record that I think the teen-agers will like—especially those who congregate around the juke boxes. It's called *The Boogie's Fine Tonight*. It's just what the title says, a boogie beat with a lot of drive. The other side is about the same but it doesn't compare.

Have you noticed today how you can buy a toy for your youngun which can almost imitate any kind of a profession? You can get him a doctor's kit, a carpenter's set, a printing press, a detective outfit, a chemistry set. Whatever your boy wants to be when he grows up, they got a toy for 'em.

They even got empty boxes for kids with no ambition.

I saw an interesting set of toy soldiers at the store. It consisted of twelve soldiers twelve rifles, two cannons and a set of draft notices. They are really up to date.

• • •

Stuart Hamblen's latest offering for COLUMBIA is a religious message done very impressively, especially the backing of the Hamblen choir. The title is *It's No Secret*. The flip side is *Blood on your Hands* which is an out-and-out sacred piece well put together.

• • •

Les "Carrot-Top" Anderson's *New Panhandle Rag* for DECCA is a good dance tune, nicely sung and probably will be heard quite often. The other side is out of the country class. No mention.

• • •

Goodnight Irene which has sort of swept the pop field has now come back to the folk market where it originally came from. Ernest Tubb, Red Foley and the Sunshine Boys really give out with this tune. The sincerity behind this platter will make this a top recording. The other side is a good recording of *Hillbilly Fever No. 2.*

• • •

Say, did you ever have frost bitten toes? I've heard that it's good to rub them with snow if you do. Of course, the best thing to do is go to a doctor. But it seems like one of the hardest things to do in New York is to find a doctor when you're sick. You can find doctors, but you can never find one who can treat what you're sick with.

• • •

Back home in Stoneville, it was different. The family doctor there could treat the family, the pigs, the horses, even the trees. As a matter of fact, we had a tree surgeon there once who had an accident one day while treating a sick maple. He fell out of his patient.

But what I was gonna say is that in New York all doctors are specialists. Not long ago, I had a little trouble with my ear. My doctor sent me to an internal medicine specialist. He sent me to an ear, eye, throat and nose man. And the ear, eye, throat and nose doctor sent me to a fellah who specialized in nothing but ears. And I just made it in time. I was running out of money.

But I was still out of luck after all. This doctor specialized only in the left ear, and it was my right one that was bothering me.

• • •

An effective little jingle called *Hard-Hearted You and Chicken-Hearted Me* is very well projected by Zeb Turner (King) and his crew. The other side is a so-so dance tune. The title is *I'm Tying Up the Blues (With a Big Blue Ribbon).*

• • •

I see there's another Atom tune out, this time by Sam Hinton, ABC records. It's an editorial on the bomb done in a folk fashion, so if you collectors of folk num-

bers want to have something interesting, here's one for your files.

Another folk number and a possible selection for the kiddies is Kenny Roberts' new tune for CORAL records. It's a novelty called *Billy and Nanny Goat.*

• • •

Joke.—Mother says, "Father, why don't you have some more of my alphabet soup?"

Father says, "No, thank you, I couldn't hold another word!"—Joke over. (Editor. Thanks for telling us.)

Let's see if you can stand one more. Joke.—There were two fellahs talking and one said:

"Gee, I wish I had my wife back again."

Other guy said, "What happened?"

First fellah said, "Oh, I swapped her for a case of cola a month ago."

"So now you realize you miss her, huh?" said his friend.

"No, I'm thirsty again!" That's all.

Well, I'll try one more. This one is about a fellah who met a girl at a party and said to her:

"Stick around, Honey, and later we'll play Pony Express."

She said, "Pony Express? What's that?"

He said: "That's Post Office with a little more horsing around!"

• • •

Well, I see Xmas is just around the corner and if you want to buy the little woman a nice present I know where you can buy a brand new Rolls Royce for a bargain price of $18,000. I went to a British auto show here recently and saw one.

When I entered the auto showroom the clerk handed me a little dictionary translating British slang into American terms. F'rinstance, a fender is known as a wing. A trunk of a car is called a boot in England.

And if you have a strangler in your saloon that doesn't mean you have a bouncer in your bar, it means you have a choke in your sedan. But the one I like best is, if you have a cubby locker in your drophead, you have a glove compartment in your convertible. Isn't that a great line? Speaking of lines I seen I've just about run out and so until next month, toodle-oo, chappies.

Young Roy Benton fought a double battle that wild black night—with the mad-dog Gorman clan, sworn to wipe every last Benton from the earth; and with the sickening fear that whispered to him now to run off and live—to run another day!

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By
ARTHUR H.
CARHART

He went headfirst into the sage.

CHAPTER ONE

Kiss of the Hangrope

VIOLENCE and mob madness boiled along the dusty main street of Sherrod's Wells. The squatty, wind-grayed houses seemed to cower under the dwarfed cottonwoods. The gnarled old trees shivered in the furnace-hot breeze. Their trembling leaves were the only green for miles along the eastern fringe of El Malvado desert—greenery that usually beckoned travelers with promise of peace and rest.

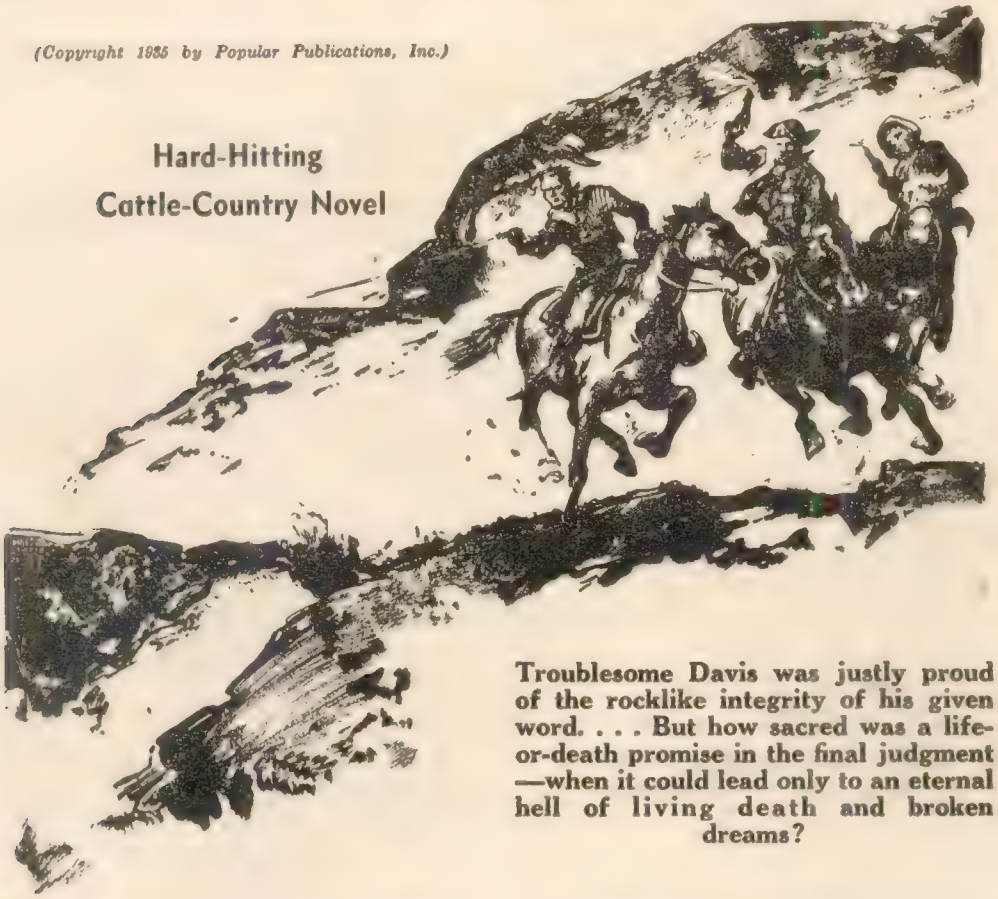
But one rider who had hurried to Sherrod's Wells had found no peace or welcome. He was the reason for this violence that swept through the town.

Dogs yapped, youngsters shrilled, and

GUNS for a DEAD MAN

(Copyright 1935 by Popular Publications, Inc.)

Hard-Hitting
Cattle-Country Novel



Troublesome Davis was justly proud of the rocklike integrity of his given word. . . . But how sacred was a life-or-death promise in the final judgment —when it could lead only to an eternal hell of living death and broken dreams?

the crazed men who milled and shouldered along the weed-bordered thoroughfare talked incessantly. That talk was like the chatter of rabid beasts. Their voices mixed and tangled until their speech was only inhuman gibberish. The voice of a mob thirsting for blood.

In the middle of that excited pack walked a man—a lean, dark-faced man, who held his head proudly. His hands were tied, and the mob hustled him roughly.

His eyes looked above their heads, over the shimmering of El Malvado, westward to the dim, phantom blue of far mountains beyond the wastelands. It was as though he could see through the mirage that hung above El Malvado's sands to pleasant scenes beyond, to meadowy mountain valleys, shaggy old peaks and many inviting trails.

He had fought his fight. He knew when the odds were too great. This pack had overpowered him. Stoically he was accepting, with a grimly shrewd fatalism, whatever hand fate had dealt. Craven

begging, frantic fighting, useless struggle—he saw no reason for making such a show. The crowd would relish it, and he would not give them that satisfaction.

The mob's voice raised in pitch and nervous chatter.

They were hanging Troublesome Davis, hanging the notorious Troublesome Davis, to a cottonwood limb. Hi-yah! What an unholy, ghoulish holiday Sherrod's Wells was having!

Somehow, as he walked amid that rabble that cried for his life, Troublesome couldn't believe it. Even as they stopped under a tree, he doubted the reality of all this.

THE loud-mouthed mob had smashed brittle pine planks of the jail door and a dozen brave-drunk punchers had jumped him. It had been a grand fight. Three of those hyenas out cold, one with a broken jaw, and Troublesome still clouting as they dragged him down in the midst of them.

A scrawny puncher who yapped like an excited terrier began lashing his long, muscle-corded legs. Someone jammed his big dust-gray hat back on Troublesome's dark head. A trickle of blood made a darker mark on his deep-browned jaw.

He stood head and shoulders above the excited crowd, facing them defiantly. Those around him talked hoarsely. Somehow, Troublesome Davis felt just too full of life, too strapping big and hard, to have a mere rope finish him.

But they were fixing to hang him to a stout cottonwood limb.

He watched proceedings with cynical detachment, the ghost of a derisive smile twisting corners of his big mouth. There was queer business in the way this lean, ferret-eyed Rance Tipton had got this gang likkered up and hot for a hanging. Tipton wasn't drunk. He was cold sober and methodically egging this gang on to the lynching.

Tipton lit a cigarette, his little eyes squinting. Troublesome had met hard men, but none harder than this Tipton.

"I'll be waitin' for you in hell," Troublesome remarked, as though making casual rendezvous for next week.

"They'll quarter no horse thieves in my part of hell," replied Tipton in icy banter.

Troublesome nodded, and the corners of his big mouth twitched.

They were hanging him as a horsethief. That was funny. He'd taken the horse, all right, from Tipton's ranch on Picadon Creek. He'd have been glad to pay for it, but there had been no chance. He'd had no cash along so he couldn't even have offered to pay, and Tipton's riders had caught him redhanded as Troublesome was riding, desperately, to head off a man and a woman before they could lose themselves in the desert westward from Sherrod's Wells.

Troublesome's eyes snapped open. Rance Tipton's men had hauled him to Mobray's office, the sheriff had put Troublesome in jail. With Mobray mysteriously absent, Tipton had organized these men and whipped them to hanging pitch.

"Yo're takin' yore hangin' awful easy," remarked Tipton, his eyes speculatively appraising Troublesome's big features.

"Never been hanged afore. It's somethin' new," drawled Troublesome. He stared back at Tipton.

IF THIS gang wanted him to squeal and crawl and beg, they'd be disappointed. Troublesome Davis had lived a lot—not so much in years, but in places, and happenings and people. The places had been lawless, the happenings mostly violent, the people hard, generous, fearless. Some were enemies to be respected if not feared; others, friends to whom he had given bountiful loyalty. Loyalty had brought him hell-for-leather after those fugitives—and into this jam under the cottonwoods.

"He's got long legs and he'll kick," barked the terrier rider who was tying his feet. "I'll tie him tight so he'll not wiggle and jerk so much."

"I've heard you had a lot of guts," observed Tipton softly. "But the way yo're standin' up to this makes me think everyone I've talked with underestimated yore nerve. Great guns, Davis, yo're about to be hung!"

A screaming inner voice, shrilling with terror, flamed within Troublesome. This gang meant business. Tipton was dead set on seeing him swing for taking that horse. He'd admitted it, and they were going to hang him for a horse thief. Well—not much to live for. Just that unsettled blood-debt. Revenge. A poor reason for living, really.

There was something else—an old, never-found dream he had carried as he followed wild ways and desperate high-roads. He'd found part of the dream: a mountain-girded valley where peace dwelt, a singing stream meandered through lush meadows, where a saddle weary rider who had followed too many trails might find an earthly Eden after a long quest.

He located his Eden, but no Eve to share it. Though he had ridden miles looked critically at a thousand forms and faces, he had not met the girl. Under test, all had shown flaws. Just another female, every one of 'em.

He'd sought no angel. Only a woman—the right one. One who would take him in spite of black spots in his past. Without a girl, he'd not go back to the valley; it would be an empty place without her. Well, here was the end of that dream. Queer that his mind should fill with these thoughts, now, when this gang, flushed, drunk and hysterical, were ready to string him up. Queer.

"He's all trussed," barked the terrier-voiced puncher, jumping away from Troublesome's feet. "He'll have a hell of a time kickin' that rope loose! He's ready—Yaah—!"

"Got anything to say?" demanded Tipton.

"Whatever I'd say, yo're dead set to string me up," Troublesome flung at him. "You'd hang me, regardless."

"I shore would—shore would," rasped Tipton.

"I'll save what breath I have," said Troublesome curtly. "I may be short on wind right sudden."

Abruptly a wild reaction lashed through him. He had gone head-on into many a battle, but the terror of the noose reached out now to snare him and kill his courage. He clamped his jaws and held back a yell of stark fright. One part of him seemed standing aside to watch, with amused detachment, while another part writhed with fear of the unknown. He choked down a scream.

They were hanging him for a horse-thief, but he'd go like a man—by God, he would!

HE DID NOT feel his teeth bite lips as he held back terror that gibbered in his throat. Primitive fear of death clutched him, and he stood, eyes closed, jaw set, strangling it. It was in the midst of hoarse voices, crazy excitement, mob hunger, but he stood on his own two legs and alone, fought his big battle against fear—and won.

He'd go to hell his own way, as he had lived, taunting the world, facing the next instant in life or death, grinning and daring it to do anything to him he could not conquer. They'd not see him break before his soul stripped out of his convulsive corpse.

Someone fingered the knot at his ear. Tipton was close, so close the others would not notice his lean face, and he was—laughing!

"I'll make you laugh—in hell," breathed Troublesome softly.

Tipton stepped back, swearing, admiration glinting in his beady eyes. "By the Lord, you've got a lot of nerve," sighed Tipton.

The rope twitched, tightened, came taut. Troublesome Davis took a sweeping last look at the world.

In that eternal second he knew he must live. It was as though a voice was calling, begging him to live.

He felt the surging desire to hold to life.

"Swing him," Tipton blared out suddenly.

Hemp bit into Troublesome's neck. And the earth dissolved under his feet. Troublesome Davis fought the rope with every last fiber of his big, lean body, with every shred of his life-hardened soul, he fought. His hands, his feet, his throat. Rope had him, rope was killing him. And somewhere, someone was calling him, needing him.

"Look at him kick!" The ravenous shout stood out from the growling roar of the little mob.

He had been ready to die. Life had seemed to promise little. But it was suddenly important that he live.

God! He just couldn't go out this way, now.

"He'd dyin' hard, like he lived," a voice said—the terrier puncher yapping with hot blood hunger in his squeaky voice.

Troublesome threw himself violently. The rope tightened. His neck had not cracked. He was strangling slowly, dangling under the old cottonwoods. The black sweep of unconsciousness tore through him. He fought out. Tipton's devils were yelling and watching him kick his life out.

A thousand drums beat in his ears, shooting pains filled him, racked his body, and he heard voices as though someone was calling him, then blackness—blackness. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

A Killer's Choice

TROUBLESOME Davis fought into blinding light with mad abandon. His wrists and ankles were bound and his head roared. He knew he wasn't in hell. Someone was throwing cold water in his face—and that sure couldn't be hell. If it was the river Jordan, it was pouring over him by the bucketful.

He heard voices. Rance Tipton's and Lou Mobray's, the beefy sheriff. It sure wasn't heaven with this pair around.

"Hey, Davis, quit fightin', will yuh?" ordered Tipton.

Troublesome jerked to repose, shook his head clear. He was in Mobray's office, and the round-cheeked officer was dousing him with water while Tipton held him. Troublesome closed his eyes and fought for composure. He wasn't dead. He was back in the living world.

He'd live!

Something was awful haywire—Tipton and Mobray reviving him after Tipton had organized that mob to hang him.

"By gosh," puffed Mobray, "I thought I hadn't cut you down in time and you were dead for keeps."

"He may be dead," remarked Tipton, smiling thinly. "It's up to him whether he's dead in fact, or people just think so."

"Beats me, why you turned horsethief," remarked Mobray as he settled into a squeaky chair. "We've heard plenty about yore outlawry and such, the whole state knows you by name and reputation. Yo're a simon-pure hell-raiser. But never a hoss thief."

"You rode hard trailin' someone," suggested Tipton. "Someone mighty important, or you'd never have stole one of my ponies like you did, after you'd ridden yore own hoss to death beyond Picadoon Creek."

The way was wide open for Trouble-

some to tell them the simple truth—that he was trying to catch up with Frisco Pryor, the gambler, and with the girl who had fled Llano de Cigarron with Pryor—that little piece of red-hot chile, La Golosina, the Spanish dancer.

Three weeks past, Troublesome had named a date when he would meet Dave Cozad, his sister's boy, at Llano de Cigarron, a spot of evil down the east side of the El Malvado desert. Riding in on schedule, Troublesome found Dave had jumped the gun, had arrived at Cigarron a week early, and like any wild kid, had lost his money to Pryor, and had fought over that Spanish girl.

Then Dave had disappeared.

His torn, blood-stained shirt had been found near the sinks of the Pothole River just outside of Cigarron. Local wiseheads figured Dave and Frisco Pryor had fought it out, Pryor had won, and probably had tossed the body into the sinks of the Pothole where it never would be found. Then Pryor and the little Spanish wildcat had hit the trail toward Sherrod's Wells.

TROUBLESOME had ridden his horse to death trying to reach Sherrod's before Pryor and La Golosina could lose themselves beyond the hot wastes of El Malvado. He'd know the gambler, though Troublesome had never seen him. But Troublesome knew La Golosina, knew her well.

She'd unknowingly betray Pryor by being with him. The money Pryor had skinned out of Dave Cozad belonged to the boy's mother. Troublesome had figured he would bring that out of Pryor, and then deal with the gambler and with that Spanish girl in an appropriate way.

Troublesome decided abruptly against telling this to Mobray and Tipton. He could do that any time, after he found what game they were playing.

"Let it pass," said Tipton sharply. "We've got more important business to talk about. That's why Lou came in at the right time and cut you down."

"Some crooked business?" suggested Troublesome. "Listen, I kill only my own meat. You've picked the wrong man."

"I don't think so," breathed Tipton. "I—just—don't—think—so." He lit a cigarette, puffed, his eyes squinting at Troublesome over the smoke. "You've been in plenty of scrapes. One more, an easy one yo're goin' to do for Mobray and me, won't make you any more an outlaw."

"You're damn positive I'll do it, ain't you?" challenged Troublesome.

Tipton's sharp face wrinkled into a smile. "I am," he agreed. "'Cause, right at the last, when the rope tightened, you didn't want to die."

"And I'm alive." Troublesome threw that at Tipton.

"Yes," hissed Tipton softly. "But only us three know that. Outsiders are goin' to keep on thinkin' yo're dead. You ride out of here tonight, at dark. Don't come back, ever. Tomorrow Lou'll bury a loaded coffin, and claim the mob done for you before he cut you down. You stay dead—but you live."

"Suppose I don't like yore proposition?" suggested Troublesome.

Tipton laughed without mirth. "You got a choice, at that," he said as he studied his smouldering cigarette. "You see, yore legs and wrists are still tied, and Lou and me know how to tie a hangman's knot. If him and me finished the job here, everyone would blame the mob."

"So you two rigged up that lynchin'," accused Troublesome.

"Yes, I reckon," admitted Tipton, unruffled. "Remember I fixed the knot just before you swung? Well, we didn't want 'em to break yore neck. We wanted you just where we've got you. When you turned hoss thief you shore did solve a problem for Lou and me."

TROUBLESOME studied. In many things he had done outside the law, he always figured he'd been on the right side, and he had always fought his own battles. It went against his grain to be wolf for this pair. He knew it was no pretty job they wanted done. The careful way they had put him in a hole so they could force him into accepting their orders indicated something right questionable.

"Suppose I'd say 'yes' and then run out on you?" he said.

Tipton shrugged, pursed thin lips, and again studied his cigarette. "You never saw us until today," he said slowly. "But maybe you're heard of us, even down beyond Cigarron."

"Not much good," drawled Troublesome. "I've heard whatever Rance Tipton and Lou Mobray says goes, around Sherrod's. And whoever don't believe that, don't live long. At least, some haven't."

Mobray shifted in the creaking chair and grunted. "All talk," he growled. "Plain gossip."

"No use coverin' up before Davis here," said Tipton to his partner. "He'll not blab after he goes out of here—whichever way he decides to go." He smiled at Troublesome—a cool, nerveless sort of smile. "You've got a reputation yoreself, Davis," finished Tipton.

"Some say good, some say bad," admitted Troublesome.

"No man can handle guns and live the life you have without getting a reputation," added Tipton. "There's one part that's almost a by-word. Once you give yore word, no matter what, you'll not go back on it."

"I take pride in that," answered Troublesome soberly. It was like affirming his religion. He never went back on what he said.

"All right. We want a promise that you'll do this job for us," said Mobray, suddenly planking his feet on the floor until his big spurs jingled like devil bells.

"You're not leavin' much choice," remarked Troublesome.

"Depends," said Tipton, his voice slipping down to a hissing whisper. "You changed your mind, just as we strung you up. I think you want to live now, for some fool reason or other."

Troublesome considered he'd done violence for less reason than the price this pair might demand in return for his life. "I'll play," said Troublesome suddenly. "It can't be worse than some things I've done, that's sure. Deal your cards."

"That's shoutin'," said Tipton approvingly. "Tie him loose, Lou, and we'll talk business."

"Who do you want murdered?" asked Troublesome levelly as the last of the ropes pulled away from his legs.

"I see we can talk plainly," breathed Tipton.

"Oh, quit this pretty talk," rasped Mobray. "Tell Davis what's in the wind, will you?"

TIPTON smiled at Mobray, that thin, calculating smile. Troublesome thought, vagrantly, how sweet it would be just to smash hell out of that assured, slow grin on that wolfish face. He might like to do it some day. Sweet bit of business, cracking Tipton.

"It's concerned with this Joe Wylie," said Tipton. "He's one of these settlers—aimin' to drive some good stock over to a place he's filed on in the Dutchman's Mountain country other side of El Malvado. Aims to build up a ranch there."

"You don't want him to get across," ventured Troublesome.

"I don't want anyone goin' into that Dutchman's Mountain country," snapped Tipton. "Yo're not so dumb. Guess why."

"It's a way to drive out blotted brands without much chance of anyone following," observed Troublesome.

"I don't want any righteous home-

steader goin' in there," said Tipton. "If Wylie did, and had luck, others would find it out, and there'd be a dozen others flockin' in. Besides I can use that pure-bred stock Wylie's got.

"Wylie doesn't get across El Malvado, but his cows does," mused Troublesome, "I guess then, the joke's on you. I don't know the waterholes in this end of El Malvado desert."

"We figured that," said Mobray. "One of our own men'll guide you as far as Wild Dog Tanks. Then he'll pretend he gets mad and rides back here. Wylie's got one rider—a crazy old coony called Baldy Jim. It'll take all three of you haze sixty head of cows to Wild Dog Tanks."

Troublesome frowned, drummed with his blunt finger end on his knees. "Well, we drive the stock that far and yore man deserts—then what?"

Tipton answered, "You drift. Lou and me come in from the far side with our riders, find this Joe Wylie's been killed, and we'll handle things from there on."

"I thought there was some sneakin' murder in this," said Troublesome slowly.

"You're not squeamish," Tipton rapped out.

"Not generally," admitted Troublesome. Coolly discussing premeditated murder with this pair was getting under his hide

"From what I've heard I didn't think you were squeamish," remarked Tipton. "In this case, you don't have to kill Wylie. All you do is to get blamed for the killin'. Our own man slips back at night and does it."

"I run. Wylie's rider tells the story, includin' yore killer desertin' afore the murder. People think I done it, and yo're covered up, so you keep yore white and shinin' characters around Sherrod's," said Troublesome caustically.

"Don't try to be funny," growled Mobray. "Don't get so hefty."

"Shut up," said Tipton turning on the sheriff. Then to Troublesome. "You've got the idea. Yo're safe from havin' reward posters spread around for you. Nobody's goin' to figure a man everyone saw hung and buried could kill Wylie. They'll have no idea who to look for. Nobody with Wylie has ever seen you afore.

"We've figured it all out. It's a foolproof cinch—not a spot of suspicion on Lou or me or our man. Yo're clear, 'cause everyone figures yo're dead and buried. They just know a rider called Smith—that's you—done the deed, then drifted."

"I get my guns?" asked Troublesome after a minute.

MOBRAY glanced at Tipton. "At Wild Dog Tanks," said the sheriff. "Our man'll hand 'em over when he slips back."

"Bueno," said Troublesome shortly. "It's yore murder, not mine. And I've decided that I want to live."

"Thought so," remarked Tipton. "I just thought so."

"Wylie's outfit moves tonight," stated Mobray. "Day time's too hot on El Malvado. Moon'll be up by nine and the desert will be plain as day."

"You don't know our man by sight, and he don't know you," said Tipton. "We made sure of that. Remember you'll be called Smith," Tipton chuckled dryly.

"It's gettin' dusk already," remarked Mobray.

"All right," answered Tipton. "You take Davis—I mean Smith. I'll go over and get our man, and we'll meet you at Wylie's camp. You see, Smith," said Tipton, turning to Troublesome and grinning, "this Joe Wylie has put his trust in Lou and me, and we've promised to get him some trustworthy men. Wylie's all set with provisions, water kegs—all lined up to travel soon as we supply a couple of riders."

Tipton left. Mobray let Troublesome through a back door, walked in deepening

shadows, reached the edge of town, and there Troublesome waited in brush cover until the sheriff got horses. A question Troublesome put concerning Wylie's equipment made Mobray turn.

"Now listen," said the fleshy sheriff, "you know yore part. You just do it. Don't let yore tongue run loose. Understand?"

They came to the camp under the cottonwoods. There was a covered wagon, a corral of poles where cattle huddled, a little supper fire that had melted into glowing ash, and a dog that barked. Tipton came out of the shadows to meet them.

"Our man'll be along directly," he reported.

"I'm goin' over the wagon," stated Mobray shortly.

TIPTON watched the arrogant stride of the sheriff until Mobray reached the wagon. A squatty man came hitching through the dusk from the direction of the corral. "Shall I hook up the team, Mr. Tipton?" he asked squeakily.

"Sure. Say, Baldy, meet Smith, one of the men helpin' drive stock. Smith, this is Baldy Jim, Wylie's hired man."

"Smith, eh?" chirped Baldy, reaching out a knotty hand to Troublesome. "Name's Smith. Well. A sight of fellers named that." He hurried away, talking to himself.

"Where's Wylie?" asked Troublesome. He was curious to see what stripe of homesteader this pair of scoundrels had marked for buzzard meat. Didn't make much difference—nesters aroused no feeling of compassion in Troublesome.

"Wylie's got a twisted ankle," replied Tipton. "He rides the wagon. We'll go over there after Lou's had his innin'," Tipton chuckled in his cold way. "Lou's havin' another look at booty he's to get out of this. Wylie's daughter. She's one reason he was so dead set on havin' it fixed so she'd sure think you rode away guilty—so she wouldn't ever suspect us."

There was a woman in this, then. Troublesome could have guessed it. Lou Mobray was the kind to pick her, while Tipton grabbed the stock. Peering through the dark, toward the wagon Troublesome saw the girl stepping through folds of canvas to meet Lou Mobray.

By that first gesture he knew. A swift glimpse of her profile against faint western glow gave positive proof.

Joe Wylie's daughter was the one girl. The girl he had hunted across mountains, through deserts, high, and low, as though he had known that if he kept on, some day, somewhere, he must find her. And he had found her—here!

Suddenly Troublesome Davis knew why he had lived. He had lived for her.

"By the Lord," whispered Tipton gazing toward the wagon, "Lou Mobray's gettin' the best of the deal. Look at her, the proud way she holds her head. She'll not be so proud after Mobray tames her. Say, she's purty—graceful as a she deer. Lookin' at her shore makes a man hungry."

Caught in the reaction of the moment, Troublesome barely heard. There was a slight sound behind them. They both whirled.

A cigarette, pulsing under the shadow of a very large hat, lit a darkish, thin-nosed face. The glow even disclosed the deep vertical crease between black brows. It was a hawkish face, and cruel—the face of a man who would carry a knife rather than tote a gun.

"Damn it all," exploded Tipton, "I wish you'd not slip up like that. I've told you enough times it makes me jumpy."

"Sorry Rance—did it from habit." The cigarette fire glowed again, and there was a hard smile on the olive-tinted face.

"Damn yore lousy soul," ripped out Tipton. "You done it on purpose. Because yo're part Apache. Never mind. Smith," he continued, turning to Trou-

blesome, "this is our other man—he's got yore guns, and'll give 'em to you at Wild Dog Tanks. Shake hands, Smith, with a man you may have heard of—Frisco Pryor."

CHAPTER THREE

Night Drive

TROUBLESOME stood in the dusk, muscles braced against attack. He had thought constantly of any meeting with Pryor as a moment when guns could flash in a gamble of life and death. Crouched instinctively, balanced to weave, Troublesome's hand whipped for his gun.

The empty holster jerked him out of that swift flood of battle tension. Sudden realization came wire-sharp and clear.

Frisco Pryor and Troublesome Davis had never met face-to-face. Neither knew the other by sight. Troublesome had counted on finding Pryor by finding La Golosina. If Pryor had known Troublesome was on his trail, the gambler must feel secure now.

For Troublesome Davis had been hanged this afternoon and would be buried tomorrow. Tipton and Mobray would keep the truth to themselves for their own protection. Pryor would not fear a man named Smith.

While they buried the man they had hung somewhere out on El Malvado, Frisco Pryor, Baldy Jim and the tramp rider known as Smith would be wrangling Joe Wylie's outfit toward Wild Dog Tanks.

Troublesome laughed, shortly.

"What's funny?" asked Frisco Pryor sharply.

"That hangin' this afternoon. Did you see it?" asked Troublesome.

"No," answered the gambler. "Tipton and Mobray's kept me hid out. I'd liked to have seen that feller hung, too—for personal reasons." And Troublesome gathered that Pryor had known he was trailed.

"Quit rag-chewin'," said Tipton with nervous sharpness. "By the time we get this outfit on the move the moon'll be up. Now, you two, remember the play."

Dropping his voice, Tipton sketched over the plans. Everything would go smoothly until they got to Wild Dog Tanks. There Pryor would get huffy, quit the outfit, pretend to head back toward Sherrod's, leaving Wylie and his outfit trapped close to the cool water at the Tanks.

That same night, Pryor would come back, finish Wylie, steal money from the homesteader to make it look like robbery, give Troublesome his guns and a map of waterholes southward in El Malvado, and then Troublesome would ride southward, leaving a guilty trail, while Pryor would hurry back to Sherrod's Wells and establish an alibi.

This crazy old Baldy Jim and Wylie's own daughter would confirm the fact that Pryor had quarreled and left a day before the murder, that this unknown Smith had quarreled with old Wylie later in the day. The next morning the old man would be dead and Smith gone.

THAT would be the situation Tipton and Mobray would ride into when they came later in the day, from the opposite side of El Malvado after having ridden around the north tip of the desert. Mobray, of course, would make a show of trying to catch this murderer named Smith, but he'd lose the trail.

"Don't forget," said Tipton turning to Troublesome, "everyone says yore promise is good as a bond. You had a choice, and you agreed to do this."

Mobray came tramping from the wagon where Baldy Jim was berating the ancestors of a team he was hooking up.

"Let's get this outfit out of here," growled the sheriff.

"Well, yo're in a hurry," remarked Tipton. "Ruth Wylie's not so sweet tonight."

"Oh, dry up," snapped Mobray. "She's cantankerous about that hangin' today. Blames me for not bein' there to stop it. If she's still hostile when I meet her at Wild Dog Tanks I'll handle her. You damn' well know I'll handle her. Let's get this outfit movin."

The majestic unreality of El Malvado opened before them as they cleared the low-crowned cottonwoods that crouched in the night. Stars dimmed. A metallic sheen washed over the blue-black of the sky. The desert bulged up out of the cedar breaks and seemed to skim the shaggy Picadoon Hills eastward from Sherrod's.

The stock had been pried loose from the camp. Troublesome's tough little horse jogged along, crowding the rumps of the purebreds. He followed the drive almost automatically. The play that had started gripped his thoughts.

Somewhere out in El Malvado there would be a showdown. Just what, Troublesome did not know. He had pledged himself to carry out certain plans—a pledge he had given in plain trade for his life.

That promise plagued him. He had never broken his word. If that had not been given, the way would have been simple, direct, drastic and positive. Even unarmed he would find a way to wage his war for Ruth Wylie. Unarmed, he would collect that debt from Frisco Pryor.

He wrestled with the idea of defaulting on his promise, and flung it from him as something actually unclean. Even a promise to Tipton and Mobray was a promise.

TIPTON cantered up. "I don't have to tell you," he said as he rode with Troublesome for a rod or so, "that Lou and me would be awful wrought up if you showed up around Sherrod's Wells again."

"I'd figured that. Reckoned I'd be askin' for a genuine burial," said Troublesome shortly.

"That's about the situation," agreed Tipton. "I just wanted to make sure you understood that before Lou and me started back to town."

Tipton pulled away to join Mobray, and Troublesome heard them talking as they rode with Pryor. A moment later they were talking with the Wylies at the wagon, and then the two headed back toward where a single light kept winking under the cottonwood trees at Sherrod's Wells.

Wagon wheels chocked, making sharp sounds about the clack of cattle hoofs. Wylie or Ruth was driving. Baldy Jim was riding a far flank. Frisco Pryor shoved the rump of the drag.

Dust filtered into the air. Shadows writhed wherever they crossed a patch of alkali. The herd seemed to become one body with many legs, a creature of the bewitched desert that was frosty under the white moon.

Troublesome Davis had shoved cattle over night trails before. The challenge of adventure had been in those drives. But in this one, moving under the brilliant desert moon, was more than mere adventure. In it was wrapped all the future, his very life. In it was the answer to that old dream of his—if he could find and hold that answer.

Abruptly Frisco Pryor pulled his horse to cut across the rear of the herd. Troublesome reined slightly to meet him. There was an element of grim humor in this; Frisco carrying his guns to give them to him at Wild Dog Tanks.

Until that moment, Troublesome would be more than half helpless. Tipton and Mobray had figured that angle. But once Frisco Pryor put Troublesome's guns back where they belonged—

Troublesome met the gambler and allowed the full moonlight to shine on his

face. Pryor made no sign. He knew "Smith"—but not Troublesome Davis by sight. Troublesome could wait his time. It would have been different if he had met Frisco Pryor in company with La Golosina. She would have known Troublesome—how well she had known him! One glimpse, and she would warn Pryor.

"Don't crowd those cows too hard," said Pryor. "I've got a rider comin' after us. Someone who'll leave Sherrod's after Tipton and Mobray get back there."

"They don't know—?" suggested Troublesome.

"You bet they don't," declared Pryor. "I'm just bellin' you to make sure you understand it's none of yore dam' business. I guess I don't have to make it no plainer, do I?"

"That's powerful plain," agreed Troublesome affably.

THE HERD had pulled away, following the rutted trail toward Wild Dog Tanks. Sounds of their travel softened. Above them came the light drum of a swift-trotting horse. Pryor peered into the east. Troublesome saw the moving spot that began to take form as a rider.

"That's the other one who's goin' with us," said Pryor shortly. "We might as well just wait and then all three ride on to catch up with that herd."

The rider came full tilt, then slackened a hundred paces away, letting the horse shuffle along to within two rods. The rider reined in.

"Come on," said Pryor. "There's nothing to be afraid of. This is that extra man I told you Tipton and Mobray had lined up. I was just explaining to him that you were going along."

"I see."

The sibilant softness of the answer tore through Troublesome like exploding dynamite. He felt his neck muscles bunch and fibers around his diaphragm tighten.

The slim rider reached to sweep off the big hat, lifted a hand to brush a dark head, tilted back that head until the moonlight poured full on the cameo features of —La Golosina, the little hellcat from Cigarron.

CHAPTER FOUR

Canyon of Shadows

FRISCO PRYOR held the guns. Numbing realization of that all-important fact hit Troublesome as he sat staring at the witchery of moonlight on La Golosina's face. Certainly she would betray him—she would recognize some gesture, the way he walked, or rode. She would unmask him, and—Pryor held the guns.

Luckily she had not seen his features in that first meeting. She and Pryor rode away to follow the herd.

The silvered night beckoned Troublesome to life. He could melt into the shadows, ride alone across El Malvado, and save his life. But it would hold no value if he rode thus alone. The knavery of Tipton and Mobray had dragged him back across the black chasm.

But it had been one clear look at Ruth Wylie's face that had made him want to live.

The stock grew weary with the desert. Hoofs rattled, wagons hubs chocked, trace chains jingled, and Baldy Jim tortured the night with his rendition of a staunch old hymn. To one side rode Pryor and La Golosina. The murmur of occasional talk between them came softly through other sounds.

Dawn finally came seeping into the east, then it was full light. Troublesome pulled his bandana up until only his eyes showed below the big hat. He had to find a way to get those guns from Pryor, and he had to do this before the Spanish girl discovered his identity.

They drove into the forenoon heat,

through the bright noon's furnace, then dropped into a shallow, paint-walled canyon where warmish water trickled between sluggish pools and straggling grass gave the stock scant feed. Pryor rode to Troublesome, glanced at the dark kerchief covering all but his eyes. Pryor smiled slightly.

"Appears you wear a mask easy," drawled the gambler.

"Yes, I do," agreed Troublesome.

Pryor shrugged. It was all right with him if this fellow didn't want his features remembered after the stop at Wild Dog Tanks.

"Resting here until midnight," stated Pryor. "We can drive to the next water after that. I'm getting some grub, then I'll be back. You'll want to sleep. Yo're ridin' herd from sundown."

Pryor hitched the gun belts to ease their load. Troublesome's gun was in one of those holsters. Watching from a distance Troublesome saw the cook fire built near the wagon.

He saw the surprise, the argument as the Wylies faced La Golosina. Joe Wylie was a gaunt man, hobbling on a crutch. Controversy stopped as Wylie apparently accepted Pryor's explanation for the presence of the Spanish girl.

THE CAMP was asleep when Troublesome tip-toed to fill a plate with grub after Pryor had relieved him from guard-the herd. He ate and slept lightly, awakening at the first sundown sound in camp.

"Send that Baldy Jim out with some grub," Troublesome suggested as he rode to relieve Pryor. "Supper wasn't hotted up, so I came on."

Pryor grunted, rode to the camp and Troublesome heard his voice scolding with replies from La Golosina—sharp talk of some kind. Baldy Jim came shuffling with a panful of hot food, a big can of strong coffee.

"Do you believe in revelations—just like in them old days?" demanded the old fellow querulously. "Fer if you do, pray—even if yore name is Smith, pray. Israel's crossin' from Egypt agin'—an' only prayer'll bring us through." He turned, hitched away, exploding Biblical phrases and emphatic amens. No chance for much help from Baldy Jim. He was too loco.

Troublesome wolfed food. He rode to camp, swung low in the saddle and dropped the tin dishes in the wreck pan, then put back to lonesome riding. One man could hold the stock easily.

Night crept low. Between sundown and moonrise, Troublesome was going to have a try at getting Frisco Pryor's guns. With these he could force Pryor to show the way to other waterholes, taking them away from tragedy that lurked at Wild Dog Tanks.

Beyond the desert there would be reckoning. Pryor would pay for what had happened to Dave Cozad down at Llano de Cigarron. But until they got to the water south of the Dutchman's Mountains, Pryor was safe. He was the only man among them who knew waterholes in this part of El Malvado.

Night became thick between canyon walls. Troublesome swung around the herd, dismounted, cached hat and spurs, crept toward the wagon. The camp slumbered in the first touch of desert cool. Everyone was drugged by fatigue. It was a time to grab those guns. Troublesome raised, stood still beside a scrub cedar.

He suddenly stiffened. Someone was prowling close under the canyon wall toward the picketed horses. Troublesome poised, thinking swiftly. Every shifting move in this game he played was loaded with the threat of death. He had to know what was afoot.

He dropped, ran tiptoe under cover of the cedar scrub. He gained the shelter of a big rock, stood there a moment but the

thumping of his own heart was the only noise in his ears. Seconds dragged. He was between that skulker and the horses, he was sure.

A ROCK had crunched up toward the eastern rim of the canyon where the driveway dropped down to the floor. Troublesome whirled. He ran in quick, short spurts, stopping to listen after each one. He got well up, toward the sloping canyon rim.

The moon was coming swiftly, the sky was paling. Shadows were becoming more intense where they crowded thick under bush and rock. With eyes that stared and ached he searched each clot of darkness. He stepped over the rim, every fiber alert.

A figure leaped almost from under his feet. The ragged rustle, that desperate lunge, uncaged the tension in Troublesome and instinctively he pouched, arms reaching, to smother any attack.

Fury broke in his arms. The wild, thrashing struggle tore loose his grip. He jumped, smashing into the shadow that fought so desperately. He felt the strong, smooth-moulded muscles so tight in his embrace.

Then his captive relaxed, and he felt the yielding softness that made his heart leap until it almost burst in its throbbing. There could be no question now who this was, not after that touch.

"Well," panted Ruth Wylie, her voice ragged and desperate, "you've caught me. I'll let you do whatever you want with me if you'll let my father go."

She twisted in Troublesome's arms, and the first white of the rising moon lit her features.

"Ruth," he husked, and he barely realized he called her name aloud, for the first time. "Ruth Wylie!"

She stared. Like racing flame, reaction hit Troublesome. The mighty longing he had held all these years had boiled up, and his heart had spoken through his voice. He dropped his arms, stepped back a half pace, his lips locked. She did not run, but stood there as though something she had heard held her.

"Where were you going?" he asked after a moment, and his voice was hard.

"To Sherrod's Wells," she answered.

"Why?" Troublesome's voice softened slightly.

She made a quick gesture of despair. "Oh, what's the use?" she breathed. "I overheard Pryor and that Spanish woman talking at sundown, after Pryor had got hold of our guns by a trick. I know everything. You're just called Smith—and it's too good a name for a murderer!" Her face lifted until he could see how she dared him to deny that. "I was going back to Sherrod's—to get Lou Mobray."

The rotten irony of that hit Troublesome heavily.

"You've got the upper hand—Smith!" He saw the little curl of her lip. "Pryor's dragged his woman with him—that Spanish girl. But you, Smith, you're the one that'll be riding from murder. That's what they said. Take me, and let my father live."

"I'd not touch you," said Troublesome huskily.

"Why?" Her question was like a whiplash.

"Yo're too—much like an angel," he whispered.

IN THOSE long seconds of moonrise they stood, while mystic night swept by. "I'd give my life to keep harm from you," he stated fiercely.

"I believe that." Impulsively her hands gripped his. As though she had found something solid to which she might hold in the midst of storm.

"Who are you?" she asked, a softness threading into her voice.

"The man they hung, back there at Sherrod's," he said slowly.

He heard her breath catch, felt her startled move.

"It's true," he said desperately. "You've got to listen." He caught a tighter grip on her slim fingers. "I came back to life. Something was callin' me. I know now what it was. I'm alive, and here—so I can save you and Joe Wylie. You've got to trust me, got to! I'll get you and yore outfit out of this, if you'll trust me."

For a dragging moment she stood still. The pure beauty of her face was like heady wine, the nearness of her roused a hunger he could not down. With a hoarse gasp he reached, his arms gathering her close. He felt her stiffen, then she threw her head back, her lips lifted in daring challenge.

"How far can I trust you?" she asked. And her lips parted until the slight curve of them was maddening.

With a sudden shake and step backward, Troublesome released her. "You were puttin' me to a test," he said steadily. "You had to know whether or not I was speakin' the truth when I asked you to trust me. You've got yore answer. I'll prove myself, and then—I'll be claimin' yore kisses."

She held out her hands impulsively and he met their steady grip. "I can believe you now, Smith," she whispered, and he had to fight more fiercely to keep from loosing his head, sweeping her into his arms, walking out there into the alluring white night, to madness, to death.

He stood like a rock as she whirled and hurried back toward camp, hurrying as though she had sensed some of the powerful force she had stirred up within him.

And as he stood, a new, fighting fever raised within him until he forced it under control. He must not go tearing into the middle of this yet. His game was to wait until Pryor had them guided through to Wild Dog Tanks. After that—war.

Troublesome started to scout the camp again. He must get hold of Pryor's guns. He must risk the bright moonlight in another attempt. But he met the gambler almost before he left the herd.

"Let's get out of here," growled Pryor. "We can rest at the next stop. I'm uneasy around this place."

THROUGH the night beauty of the desert they drove again. But as Troublesome rode through the sage, there was a shouting song in his heart. Ahead was the threat of death, but he rode eagerly to meet it.

They barely stopped at the next waterhole—just long enough to get food, and drink. Then they hurried on. Troublesome ate a snack in the saddle, content to keep with the herd, away from La Golosina.

Night faded, day blazed, and they drove on. Pryor had been caught by some restless uneasiness that kept him on the move. He and La Golosina quarreled acridly as they rode, as La Golosina always quarreled when she argued with a man.

The gambler's temper became saw-edged and quick. The whole outfit became ragged and irritated. Only half-crazy old Baldy Jim sang camp meeting songs that made Pryor swear until the hot air blistered.

Mirage shimmered above the baking sands. Cattle turned toward phantom lakes. The mountains danced. But the blue cones of the Dutchman's range held steady, and beyond them Troublesome knew was Short Creek Baldy, the peak that guarded his valley. El Malvado was a hell through which they had to pass, as though through fiery test, but beyond was the valley.

Shadows streaked eastward as they weaved into Wild Dog Tanks. Here pools of sweet water brimmed in rocky holes, there a meadowy bit of valley and green trees showed in dark contrast with dusty tints of El Malvado. Cows would not try

to leave this place. They would like it.

All hands turned to making camp, starting a fire, getting food ready. Dusk came quickly. Supper steamed. Troublesome knelt beside the fire, shielding his features against dull fire glow with broad-brim, as he helped himself to grub. The others had eaten. The fire was deserted.

Frisco Pryor's hurried drive had lopped a day from schedule. Another day would drag by here at Wild Dog Tanks if he quarreled with Joe Wylie on the morning Tipton and Mobray had designated.

By dawn Troublesome Davis meant to have those guns in his hands. Then they would be hitting southward in the direction of Short Creek Baldy, with Pryor guiding. Pryor's hurry had given that one day of start over Tipton and Mobray.

Troublesome dished himself more stew, started to get up. A flame leaped up from the piñon wood, waving above the dull ash and glowing coals. A hand caught his hat, the flame lit his face, and he half whirled, to face the taunting smile of La Golosina.

"Is it nice," she whispered silkily, "for a good-lookin' man to so hide his face from ladies? Especially old friends!"

FOR seconds Troublesome stood, swaying. Swiftly he measured the situation. If this girl told Pryor now, the whole jig was up. If he could stow her away, anywhere, anyway, for an hour, in that time, he could get the guns—even if he had to jump Pryor bare-handed.

"I've got something to tell you," said Troublesome in a low voice. "Important. And for you only. Come over back of the wagon."

They stepped into shadow. Troublesome put his plate on a rock. As he pivoted to face the girl, his glance swept the camp. Nobody could see them. With a whip, he had his big neckerchief off, wrapped it, twice, knotted it, almost before La Golosina moved. She was fighting as his long arms gathered her, but he cinched down. He heard the noise of protest in her muffled throat.

"If you'll let me carry you over to where we can talk without bein' heard, I'll not hurt you," he said quickly. "But you just go quiet, or I'll crack yore neck."

She relaxed a little and he started out, in shadows, beyond some cedars where there were choppy rocky outcrops. He walked grimly. The perfume that La Golosina used on her hair was in his nostrils, and he thought of Dave Cozad, young, strapping, devil-may-care, being done for in a fight over money and this woman.

She was easy to carry—dainty, hellishly dainty, and pretty. He threw her to her feet, reached, unwound the kerchief, when they got beyond easy call of the camp.

"Remind you of old times, amigo?" asked La Golosina, with an impertinent toss of her head.

"Yes," said Troublesome slowly. "And it makes me want to wring that smooth neck of yours."

"So we still love," said the Spanish girl, cynically. "You hate me, so you love me, maybe. No? Well, I would stab you, my loved one, if you got so rough with my neck."

"We understand each other," snapped Troublesome.

La Golosina studied his face in the deepening light. "I don't think so," she said slowly. "You believe you know why I come with Freesco? No? You don't. It is because of someone else I follow heem into this desert they call El Malvado. I follow Freesco because he mus' tell me where is my Davee."

"You mean Dave Cozad?" demanded Troublesome.

"Si, your sobrino—nephew."

"Look here," snapped Troublesome, "people at Llano de Cigarron said he was dead, that Pryor had murdered him in a

quarrel over you. Is he dead? Tell me. Damn your smilin' face! If you know—"

HE REACHED, caught her and pulled her toward him. He shook her roughly and La Golosina laughed with a short, cutting edge to her voice and looked into the dusk beyond Troublesome. Slowly he turned. He saw Ruth. She faced the afterglow, her face white, her eyes big with what she had seen.

"Ruth," he blurted, took a step. "I've got to explain—"

"You can't," said Ruth Wylie, and there was a sob in her voice. "There's nothing you can say, not after what was said the other night, and what I've seen here."

She whirled. Troublesome took a step to follow and La Golosina caught him, and with all her slight strength, jerked him back.

"Listen, Troublesome," she cried in a low voice, "you've got to talk to me—a minute. Troublesome Davis—listen to me." She blocked his path. "If you love that girl, as she loves you, you mus' listen." She attempted to shake Troublesome.

He was stopped by her vehemence.

"I've got to tell you," said La Golosina quickly. "Of Pryor's plans. Pryor? I hate him. You don't believe that. It makes no difference. But hark to this, my one-time lover. Pryor is not going to do what Tipton and Mobray planned. Do you think he would do murder and let them have the spoils? Huh! You don't know that man—he quarter Apache and three-fourths devil."

She looked around quickly.

"Pryor is taking this outfit for himself," she half whispered. "He's turning south from here. He's taking it, after he's done away with you men—do you understand? Then he will drive this stock by a trail he knows, down toward Short Creek Baldy, a mountain, to a fine valley there. There he will keep this herd."

"A valley, near Short Creek Baldy," began Troublesome.

"Listen to me, Troublesome Davis—" began Golosina, and stopped, rigid.

Back of Troublesome there had been a step on the rocks. "Smith?" breathed the voice of Frisco Pryor. "Damned if I didn't half know it. Not Smith, but—Davis!"

"Don't shoot," cried La Golosina. "Don't shoot, Freesco. I'm in line. Hit him, Freesco! Hit him Queek!"

Troublesome Davis pivoted, plunging, to meet a blow that knocked him down, while his hands grappled and slipped and his senses faded.

CHAPTER FIVE

Death in the Desert

TROUBLESOME stared at what might be his last sunrise. He was bound by ropes so tightly drawn they no longer hurt. Moonlight disclosed rims of the shallow canyon in which he lay. Dawn light showed the sand-floored corridor that narrowed up canyon and below twisted so sharply vision extended only a few feet.

By rolling a little he saw footprints of Pryor and La Golosina. He wondered why Pryor had roped him and tossed him here instead of finishing him. Pebbles rattling, the sound of hurried steps on hard rock down canyon, made Troublesome flop to his back. He could tell by the light, quick steps that a girl was coming.

Ruth Wylie? He dared hope. But it was La Golosina.

"Oh—it's you, you blood-thirsty little devil," Troublesome flung at her. "You helped Pryor trick me last night."

"I saved your life," she countered.

"For what?" he demanded. "To rot here, I suppose."

"No," she said hurried. "Listen to me. Freesco is coming. Why? Las' night I talked to the Apache part of him. He listen, and lick his leeps. I tol' heem it would put the fear in thees Tipton and that big ox, Mobray, if they find you stake out on the ant hill by Wild Dog Tanks. That make this Freesco feel beeg, that somebody might fear him."

"Torture—while I go crazy with the sun in my face?"

"Si—thas Freesco's plan. But I come first. See, I have a knife. I cut theese rope, along your back. You lie so, Freesco not see you are free. In your han' is thees knife. He come, he stoop over, you jump up—"

"Now ain't it too bad!" cut in the voice of Frisco Pryor. "The sand down-canyon's so soft I could sneak up and spoil this."

Slowly, La Golosina turned, her face gray. She jumped, her arm raised. There was the thud of colliding bodies. The steel licked at Pryor. He caught her wrist, twisted. The knife fell, and he kicked it away. For seconds they stood braced while all the hatred La Golosina had kept masked was in her face.

"So that's how you love me," jeered the gambler.

"You keel Dave Cozad, the only man I really give my soul to," she burst out. "You keel heem—now I keel you!"

"Damn you!" blared Pryor. He swept her from her feet, flung her, leaped, and they struggled on the sand as the Spanish girl fought with all the fiery strength in her fine little body. Troublesome jerked to watch the uneven match. He groaned at his helpless condition.

"I'll show you!" rasped Pryor.

GRAVEL sprayed away from thrashing boots, or crunched as they rolled. The gambler slowly crushed her face into the gravel. His knees gripped and he twisted her wrists to cross them behind her back. He held her tightly, jerked a rawhide throng from his pocket, knotted it until her wrists were creased and purple.

Pryor jumped free. La Golosina twisted over, sat up, glared.

"Aren't you glad you thought of the Apache anthill trick?" sneered Pryor. "Well, now, my little dove, you'll keep him company. You'll go crazy together."

"Pryor, you devil," began Troublesome, then stopped, for Pryor wanted them to break and beg. There was a savagery in him beyond anything either red Apache or bad white might devise. To see others writhe fed Pryor's feeling of importance and power.

"I'll tell you all my plans and you'll like them less," taunted Pryor. "I'll leave Mobray and Tipton holding the sack here just like I planned. But I'll not take you as my woman, my sweet little Spanish pigeon."

Pryor laughed shortly. "Bah! You're such a little morsel. This Wylie girl's a woman, and what sport it will be to break that will of hers."

Pryor licked his lips. La Golosina cursed him in soft-rolling Spanish that lashed like a whip. Pryor turned to smile at Troublesome. "You don't relish my new plans, either," he taunted. "You'd like to have your hands free, and a gun in them. Know where your gun is? It's strapped on the saddle of my horse down the canyon, with all the others. Even the Wylies' guns are there. I take them wherever I move—nice and safe."

"My spirit, she haunt you," La Golosina shrilled.

Pryor chuckled. "No ghost could bother me when I have Wylie's daughter in my arms," he replied. "Well, I'll tie my pretty one here plenty tight, then get these Wylies on the move. I'll circle back then, and stake you out."

Pryor leered, then spun, crouching. A rock had rattled down-canyon, beyond

the sharp turn. He started stalking like a cat.

Troublesome yelled a warning. Almost as though his yell had jerked a trigger, a figure leaped from the low rim, down sheer twenty feet, falling on Pryor. Troublesome yelled again, not in warning but in wild cheering.

It was Dave Cozad.

Pryor jumped to get free, failed, and they smashed. La Golosina recognized Dave. Pryor cursed, jumped, struck, but Dave lunged in counter attack. Down they went, tumbling in the sand.

Up they came, pummeling. They slipped in loose sand. Dave Cozad's long-muscled arms slashed at the gambler like scythes. And Dave laughed crazily, as he flung his rag-clad, desert-dusty body on Frisco Pryor.

"Davee!" chanted La Golosina and jerked at her wrists.

THE FIGHTERS stood and slugged. Blows thudded in the narrow, confining canyon. The noise and fury of the fight seemed intensified, bottled in this narrow place. Pryor snarled and leaped and young Dave clouted and struck and charged.

He fell, then jumped up, groggy, game, with blood dripping from a scratch near his curly mop. But in that flashing instant, Troublesome knew Dave had been hit a numbing blow.

"Here," he snapped at La Golosina. "Roll here, so I can bite loose those knots on yore wrists."

She thrust her wrists in Troublesome's face and he heard her sobbing a prayer.

"Queek," she commanded as he bit and gnawed. "Oh, Dios, you mus'—he'll keel Davee!"

Troublesome caught the knot in a desperate tug. It gave. He tore with the strength of his jaws. Thongs came loose, lashing lightly in his face. La Golosina jumped free.

"I'll finish you this time, Cozad," Pryor cried. "I'll finish what I thought I'd done at Cigarron!"

Dave Cozad crumpled from a blow that Pryor had struck with a rock in his hand. Dave lifted hands ineffectually trying to guard off the death blow. The gambler seemed to pause and gloat, for an instant.

Then, like a wild thing, La Golosina jumped. The knife Pryor had wrenched from her flashed. Pryor spun slowly, throwing the rock as queer surprise spread on his face. He had been so intent on braining Dave Cozad he had not seen that blow coming. He staggered, groping down canyon, a queer rasp in his breathing.

"My Davee!" cried La Golosina and threw herself toward him. There was a wealth of love in that cry. Troublesome hitched over until he sat braced against the canyon wall. He stared as this good-looking, clean-featured boy gathered La Golosina close to him.

Down canyon Pryor fell, jerked, and lay still. Suddenly Troublesome felt his nerves freeze. There lying dead at the turn of the tiny canyon was the only person who could take them to the hidden water-holes as they dodged Tipton and Mobray.

"Kiss her again, then take time out and tie me loose," broke out Troublesome.

THEY both came, talking excitedly, and while they released him, Troublesome learned how Dave Cozad had come to be here. He had been only wounded at Cigarron. He had hidden away to let the wound heal so he could have another try at Pryor.

Dave had missed Troublesome, and then learning that his uncle was following Pryor and La Golosina, had picked up the trail. Thinking Troublesome's trail had ended at Sherrod's, Dave had kept on out into El Malvado on foot, trailing this girl.

And she, uncertain whether Dave was dead or not, had been playing along with Pryor for two reasons—to find out what had happened to Dave back at Cigarron, and to get the money and send it back to Dave's mother. Then she had plotted to wreak vengeance on Pryor.

"There's the money, probably, lying there on the sand," said Troublesome as he walked stiffly, pulled Pryor's shirt back, unbuckled a money belt and tossed it to Dave. "May do you some good, if we can get out of this land of hell."

"We've got to get out," declared Dave. "We've got to get out—this Spanish kid's promised to marry me."

Troublesome stared. "Marry? That girl? Listen Dave, you don't know about her—"

"He does," broke in La Golosina. "I tol' heem. Ever'theeng. Because I love heem—only heem. Never anyone else—ever. He knows—every theeng. I kill Pryor, I kill a thousan' mens, I kill myself—if he say." She lifted her chin defiantly as she faced Troublesome. Something had happened to La Golosina, something powerful. Troublesome knew she spoke true.

"Yo're lucky, kid," said Troublesome after a second. "If I was in yore boots, and a girl cared for me like that, only the future would count. Don't let her ever regret what she's said." Welling up in him was a remembrance of the night before, of Ruth Wylie whirling away as he had tried to explain.

He hurried down the canyon. Pryor's horse jumped, snorted, ran, out from the mouth of the canyon, southward. Troublesome stood still, calling. The horse ran on in a straight line toward a mirage that quivered in early morning light.

La Golosina and Dave came up behind him. All the guns in the party were strapped to that scampering pony, heading into the wastes. Troublesome stood helplessly and watched them go.

"You got a gun, Dave?" he asked without turning.

"Yes, but they sold me the wrong ammunition at Sherrod's. It's old black powder junk and won't fit."

"Look," exclaimed La Golosina. "Wylies! They've left." She painted to where, dust kicked up by hoof and wheel, made a dim column in the morning.

"We'll have to trot to catch up with them," said Troublesome as his mind whipped into the beginning of a desperate plan. "We've got to get those guns, so I'm going after Pryor's pony. Then I'll swing back and catch up with you. Keep the Wylies moving, angling south-like, away from any chance of meetin' Tipton and Mobray. If you love yore lives, keep 'em movin'."

CHAPTER SIX

Guns on El Malvado

THE MALEVOLENT grandeur of the desert leered at Troublesome Davis as he hit out following those tracks of shod hoofs. At a slight rise he looked back. A mirage had swallowed Wild Dog Tanks. Ahead a mirage stretched across cactus, flooding the desert with false waters.

At noon the pony still was jogging southward. The sun was brassy, the earth crawling with heat. Tomorrow Tipton and Mobray would be at the Tanks—early, or mid-noon, or later. And as Troublesome weighed his chances of catching that crazy horse and getting back, the desert seemed to dance in mad rhythms about him, as though gloating over him.

The vast sky, the endless earth, the heat, the shimmer that made those false lakes dissolve and blend and writhe—he was a tortured soul in a heat-blasted hell, doomed to plod on until life burned out of him. With every fiber crying for rest, his

eyes paining from wasteland glare, Troublesome quickened his pace.

He saw hoofprints plain on a stretch of chalky alkali, lost them on bare rock, found them, followed them for what seemed leagues while the sun slanted west. Nightfall almost, and he had not yet caught up with that fool horse.

The pony might travel all night. He lost the tracks, then circled while he fought stampede and a sense of defeat. Abruptly the earth seemed to yawn lazily at his feet. In front of him was a live-water valley guarded by sharp little cliffs of rim-rock. A river rippled through the center, and there were grass and trees, a hidden garden in this lost place of hell.

A horse snorted. Troublesome froze. Pryor's pony was at the river's edge, starting to drink.

Troublesome spun, trotted, his fatigue forgotten. He located the tracks of the pony and with eager hands he formed a great snare in the cleft trail as he often had done while trapping mustangs.

He jumped the horse from down-valley, yelling, waving his arms, and running at the pony. He cheered jerkily as the horse lunged into the loop. He caught the rope.

"Easy boy," he cautioned. "Easy—whoa, boy." He gathered broken reins in one hand, and his other stole along quivering withers to touch—stocks of highpowered rifles and filled ammunition belts.

He wanted to yell triumphantly, but he was too fagged. He blocked the back trail where it climbed out below. He picketed the horse, shot a rabbit as it came to drink, built a small fire, wolfed half raw meat, slept.

DAWN streaked over El Malvado as he rode out from that little oasis, turned in the saddle, and looked for landmarks. He stared, rubbed his eyes, looked again. Yesterday it had been hidden in heat haze, but sunrise gilded it until his mountain stood out like a beacon. Through a gap on the Dutchman's Mountains he saw—Short Creek Baldy.

Troublesome could trail out now, without the desert knowledge of the dead Pryor.

He laughed, a short, crackling-hard laugh, at the mighty expanse before him. He headed the pony towards the Tanks. In this strip of hell he had found a familiar landmark that meant life. El Malvado could not whip him now, only what waited at the Tanks might down him.

And he rode grimly, almost unmindful of the desert, to meet whatever waited—whatever might leap at him out of this threatening inferno.

Where the desert ridged up slightly, he reined in to scan the blistered acres near Wild Dog Tanks. He thought he saw a tendril of thin smoke lifting there, but could not be sure. He pulled left sharply, swinging to cut trail of the wagon. He trotted his horse down a narrow, concealing draw. If that was smoke from a fire he must cut the wagon trail, be certain he was ahead of Mobray and then catch up with the wagon and little herd. That was on ahead.

The horse trotted on muffling sand. The draw ended with startling sharpness. The horse jumped. Troublesome snapped taut.

Toward the Tanks, seven riders had reined in sharply—Tipton, Mobray and five others. Mobray's voice burst out, clearly. "There he is now," bawled Mobray. "Get him!"

Troublesome jerked the pony back. Lead chipped shale at the draw's portals. Men yelled, and another gun bellowed. Troublesome set spurs, and the pony flailed up the dry draw.

The draw shallowed sharply. Troublesome swerved the pony out into the open. He saw the pursuit party had split, Mobray led the direct attack. Tipton, with three others, was swinging to get be-

Tipton, with three others, was cutting off escape at the canyon.

tween Troublesome and the only cover that gave a chance for escape—a desert canyon a little way westward that dropped into the wasteland like a ramp.

Troublesome drove for it. Lead sang near. He fired without aiming. Tipton's gang replied, slashing in from the flank. The pony stumbled. Troublesome had heard lead slap.

Defeat leaped up in front of him, hideous and certain. The pony lunged on uncertainly. Death seemed to be screaming as lead ripped the hot air of El Malvado.

Back of him Troublesome heard a yell of triumph. Only a couple of hundred yards to the shelter of that canyon, but the pony under him was staggering now. He stumbled, caught himself, then fell forward, nose down. He hit hard, stunned momentarily.

Troublesome jumped free, tore loose the second rifle from saddle scabbard. Ammunition belts were already around his waist. Bullets kicked sand around his feet as he r · ·He lunged to a sliding stop back of a low spot of sandstone. Chips flew in his face.

He sighted and fired. A man with Mobray screamed, tumbled, and lay still. A horse fell. Mobray and the remaining rider, swung sharply. They were coming in an Indian attack, circling, while Tipton and his men were swinging wide, around to the canyon back of Troublesome. They would leave their horses at the rim, drop into the canyon, come crawling up behind him.

The sinister beauty of the desert, its brilliant, hellish colors, seemed to taunt him. In that glance he saw the trail left by the wagon as it had headed into the canyon. Troublesome cursed, swung around, shot at Tipton's bunch as they rode to attack him from behind. He gathered himself to make a run for it, to get to the canyon and dig in. Once there, he might hold them off until nightfall.

TROUBLESOME turned back toward Mobray. Those, two were coming in a quick-shifting, head-on charge, and Troublesome levered his gun empty. There was no time to reload the rifles. He risked a ruse.

Suddenly leaping high, he fell as though mortally hit. But as he came down, his left arm was laced with agony. The rifleman back of the dead horse had winged him.

He fought dizziness and searing pain. He heard Mobray yell exultantly. Troublesome waited as the crooked sheriff and the rider came riding recklessly to what they thought was a kill.

They dismounted, shielded by their horses. Mobray came up directly, but the rider circled, his rifle at ready. Troublesome jumped, his gun spurted. The rider doubled, slid from the saddle on his face. Troublesome whirled and faced Lou Mobray.

"Double-crossing—" bawled Mobray, and his gun belched lead.

Troublesome laughed. Mobray's own crooked man, Pryor, had upset all agreements. Quick death—sudden death, for one of them. They were trying to blot him out, but Troublesome Davis must live, if he ever was to see Ruth Wylie again.

Troublesome felt a bullet plow a redhot furrow along his ribs. He fired deliberately. Mobray gasped, grabbed his belly and fell down. He jerked once, and lay still. Troublesome looked at him wonderingly, then the shearing squeal of lead at his ear snapped him alert.

That man back of the dead horse yonder would have him wide open if he took shelter on that side of the rocks. Tipton and his riders would have him from the canyon side. But he had a moment more of life on the canyon side of that little dike that gave such pigmy protection out in the middle of the wastes.

He flung himself down, jammed shells into his rifle. He lifted the gun and saw Tipton and his two men dismount and start trotting toward the canyon rim.

A rifle bellowed—not a high-power, but a great-throated old black-powder gun that shook the air. Tipton screeched, pitched headlong. The others stopped, fired, emptying magazines in a panic. Then they broke, running back to their horses and spurring out of gun range.

It was the break he needed. Whoever had fired that old muzzle-loader had given him the break.

Troublesome scooped up the guns and ran, dodging and stooping, toward the canyon. Back of him the renegade behind the dead horse opened up.

THEN CAME, from ahead, the voice of Ruth Wylie calling his name. He saw her, as he jumped headlong into the shelter of the shale-walled canyon. Saw her hands outstretched, her arms calling him—and suddenly Troublesome Davis sobbed, dryly, as a hard man will sob.

Beyond her were Dave, and Baldy Jim, both working at reloading the old squirrel rifle. Beside Dave was La Golosina,

hurling shrill defiance at those two scared riders who had run away after Tipton fell.

But they had lost interest in storming that canyon, and were swinging back toward the man behind the dead horse. Up the canyon, painfully hobbling on his crutch, came gaunt Joe Wylie.

"My dear—oh, my dear!" Ruth Wylie was saying in whispering sobs. "Dave and La Golosina have told me—I prayed—"

"God must have been listenin'," said Troublesome, solemnly, and dropped rifles to gather her close in his good arm.

Ruth looked up, suddenly smiling through tears. Her lips lifted, as they had back there in desert moonlight.

"I guess," said Troublesome, "maybe, I've made good." He knew the old dream had come true as he met her lips.

"Gosh, look!" broke out Davy. "Those fellows are ridin' away hell-for-leather. Doggonit, now we've got plain buryin' to do!"

"The Lord giveth, and he taketh away," said Crazy Jim. "Far as I'm concerned, he can have that whole bunch."

Joe Wylie came up. Talk broke in waves. The wagon had broken a reach; it was stalled down canyon a few hundred yards. The old gun had been a keepsake of Wylie's grandfather, but they had broken up those black powder cartridges Dave had bought at Sherrod's and got enough for a dozen loadings— enough, they had hoped, to hold off Mobray and Tipton until Troublesome could come.

Troublesome looked at Ruth Wylie. He'd never seen anything as beautiful as she was, smiling while her eyes still glistened. It made him forget even that hurt in his arm. He turned to look back toward Sherrod's and then he turned to Dave, smiling.

"Kid," he said, the corners of his mouth twitching, "you and me were reported dead, back there beyond Sherrod's. Maybe any bad that was in us can be left in dead man's hands. El Malvado's been our purgatory. There's somethin' like paradise ahead, yonder, at the foot of Short Creek Baldy. You, and La Golosina, and Joe Wylie can share it, if you will."

He turned to Ruth. "We're headin' toward home," he said simply.

And she nodded.

THE END

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WAGON WHEELS WEST!

By L. C. DAVIS

The Pony Express had some of the toughest bullwhackers in the West on its payrolls—and yet if a man so much as cussed at a mule, he was fired!

THE Pony Express was only a publicity stunt. Russell, Majors and Waddell, its sponsors, believed annihilation of time and space between St. Joseph and Sacramento would so fire the public imagination that the firm's waning prestige with its creditors would be revived.

As an advertising medium it succeeded beyond their wildest hopes, for nothing in frontier history was so sensational. However, it failed to pay off in hard cold cash, so badly needed to keep their Conestogas rolling westward. In fact, it just about finished the job of bankrupting the pioneer freighting firm.

Russell, Majors and Waddell did not come into being all at once. It was like triplets being born on different days. Alexander Majors, Missouri farmer, and the only practical freighter of the three, started the ball rolling in 1848 when he bought a half dozen wagons and oxen to match. His bullwhackers were compelled to sign a pledge that they would not use profanity or needlessly punish the animals.

"I will tolerate only sober, God-fearing men," he said.

Securing a contract to haul goods from Independence or Westport to Santa Fe, he departed August 10 of that year and returned ninety-two days later. It was a record for freighting on the twenty-seven-year-old Santa Fe Trail. The following year he made another trip and by 1850 his holdings had grown to ten wagons and more than a hundred oxen. Profits that year amounted to $13,000. A contract to transport military supplies from Fort Leavenworth to Fort McKay, in Western Kansas, followed swiftly.

Four years later his equipment had grown to a hundred wagons and 1,200 oxen. It was at this point that William H. Russell, Liberty merchant, came on the scene. The Vermont-born dreamer had been eyeing with satisfaction his fellow Missourian's success for years, and the following year they formed a partnership. On March 27, 1855, Majors and

Russell signed an exclusive two-year contract to transport all military supplies west of the Missouri river.

Leavenworth, a squatter town of tents south of the fort, had sprung up, and here the new firm established its base of operations. They were in big business now and they proceeded accordingly. Fixed freight rates were adopted. Offices, warehouses, a store, and a wagon and blacksmith shop were erected.

About this time the third member of the Missouri triumvirate joined the firm. He was William B. Waddell, Lexington banker and merchant. A lumber yard and sawmill were added to their enterprises, as well as a packing plant to supply meat for the twenty trains that dotted the plains. The firm now employed 1,700 men, and owned 500 wagons and 7,500 oxen, valued at nearly a half million dollars.

It was Russell, the dreamer and promoter, who was the prime mover and money raiser for the organization. Accumulated debts meant very little to his dreams of empire and wealth. There was only one thing uppermost in his mind: the firm must plunge deeper and expand farther. They organized subsidiary partnerships and townsites and bought heavily in Leavenworth real estate. Not content with this, Russell, on his own initiative, helped promote a railroad bank, insurance company and steamboat, all within the first year of the firm's history.

In 1855 they made $150,000, and did the same the following year, but those were the peak years. From then on it was downhill. In the winter of 1857-58 the trains were caught in snows enroute to the northwest, resulting in heavy losses in equipment and animals. Russell put in a claim to the War department for almost a half million dollars but was informed that the government had no money with which to pay the claim. Neither could it pay a freighting bill of more than $300,000. Ruin stared the freighters in the face.

Secretary of War Floyd, however, permitted the firm to draw acceptances upon the department, enabling them to obtain loans and keep the wagons rolling again toward Utah. Gold was discovered in Colorado in 1858 and the following year Russell had organized the Leavenworth and Pike's Peak Express Company on his own, since his partners would have nothing to do with it. Later the firm took it over to add to their other indebtedness.

While carrying passengers and mail was out of their line, Russell felt that it was a good advertising scheme. Nothing daunted over this failure he conceived the short-lived but history-making Pony Express in 1860. Young Bill Cody, who started as a messenger for the firm at the age of ten, became a rider for the Pony Express and later rode on to greater glory in the West as Buffalo Bill.

Russell, however, became involved in illegal bond transactions and was arrested on Christmas Eve of 1860 and placed in a Washington, D. C., jail in default of bond. A federal grand jury indicted him and congress investigated him. The whole affair shook the nation, but the indictment finally was quashed and Russell returned to his manipulations.

He attempted to recoup his freighting fortunes but his past record handicapped him. Given a wide berth by Eastern bankers and the cold shoulder by old Western friends he ended up peddling patent medicines and died penniless. Hometown papers gave scant notice to his passing and he lies today in an unmarked grave at Palmyra, Mo.

After assigning their holdings to their creditors, Majors and Waddell lived out useful lives. Although fairly successful in other undertakings they are best remembered for their part in the great industrial expansion of the West.

Gripping Novel of the Stage Trails

By JOHN PRESCOTT

"Who's this dead man?" Clyde demanded.

Into the gunsmoke hell of a rigged death trap, Sheriff Anson tooled the Roswell Stage—to catch himself a stage coach robber, or kill himself a friend!

Gold-Trace Gun-Guard

CHAPTER ONE

Stage Hoppers

CLYDE ANSON had a variety of troubles plaguing him that morning, riding north of Roswell. A young man, who normally took deep pleasure and satisfaction in his living and surroundings, he was not accustomed to the vexations which were crowding him.

It was bad enough that certain highwaymen were making a circus of the last days of the Roswell stage run—soon to fall before the slow

but steady approach of the Santa Fe tracks from Clovis. It was bad enough, and any town marshal, himself included, would have counted it a full cup running over, without the additional worry occasioned by the recent appearance of his older brother, Jud—a generally soft-spoken man, of uncertain past and doubtful present.

It was almost a relief to hear the gunfire breaking across the low hills out ahead of him.

Pounding around the last of the concealing rock outcrops and humps of tan-white soil, he saw the stage ahead of him and knew how it was with those who rode it. He had not been surprised to hear the shooting, and for that reason he had ridden out there in the first place. Now it sat there, quiet and immobile, with the occupants standing about it in uncertainty and fear while old Ed Werfel crouched over the figure of a person lying in the road.

Clyde knew better than to risk a dry-gulching in vain pursuit of those who had seeped back into the humps and arroyos leading to the western hills, and he kept straight ahead and swung down when he sided up to the dust-streaked crimson stage. Shining and beautiful when clean, it was one of the last that Abbot-Downing had made for that run.

When Clyde came up to him he glared at Clyde as though he was in some remote way responsible for the scars which marred its shapely splendor.

"Gol-dang ye, Clyde, for what in hell be you comin' now?" he said. "A fine time, with the shootin' over and done with."

"I just come out to see you get indignant," Clyde said to him. "It's always worth the ride. Who's this?"

Clyde looked down at the body of the man. He was lying flat on his back with his swallow-tail coat spread wide beneath him. A tall beaver hat lay a few feet away and his checkered waistcoat was drenched in blood. Though he was dead, one hand still clenched a large-bore derringer.

"Gamblin' feller rode down from Clovis, name of Henderson. He wasn't goin' to let em' have his money. Fat chance he had."

"How many was there?" Clyde said. "The same bunch?"

"Four of 'em," Ed Werfel said. "Four hounds from hell. Come swoopin' down not more'n three minutes back. Quick as lightnin'."

"Anybody else hurt?" Clyde said. He looked around and saw the others, three of them, a young boy and a pair of feather hatted, sateen-wearing middle-aged women, standing near the step and regarding him with doubt. They appeared to expect him to carry on where the bandits had left off, and when he hitched at his gunbelt their collective eyes observed the move with fascination.

"Why, gol-dang it, ain't you got eyes, son?" Ed Werfel whipped a spray of plug into the wind as he swiveled his head around to indicate the abrasions on the Concord. "Look at her! She's fair ruint!"

DESPITE the presence of the dead man, Clyde felt himself beginning to grin. "I mean your passengers," he said. "How about the rest of 'em? Are they all right?"

Ed Werfel looked at the trio in a surprised way, as though he was for the first time aware of their existence. "Them?" he said. "Them? 'Course not, they ain't hurt. But look at this-here coach, Clyde! I tell ye, Clyde, she'd leak molasses now!"

Clyde walked around the carriage and saw how the shooting had come from the side and rear. There had been quite a lot of it, but it had been careless, likely done to frighten rather than kill or in-

jure. The purpose in mind had been accomplished. They had got the strongbox.

"Had about five thousand in it," Ed Werfel said. "But even if it was only fifteen cents it's still the principle of the thing. They're gettin' like coyotes in a chicken yard. I been held up twice in three weeks. They're gettin' all that railroad money I'm supposed to bank down here at Roswell. 'Course, I don't give a hang if the railroad loses every cent it's got, pushin' the stage line out like it is, but this-here coach can't stand that kind of treatment, I tell ye. You got to do somethin', Clyde."

Clyde Anson gazed off at the mountains to the west and swore. It did no good to point out that he had no real authority beyond the city limits. He had got his nose into the hold-up business weeks ago, and now his participation was expected as a duty rather than a kind of hand-out of his time.

"All right, Ed," he said. "I can't be everywhere, I got here when I could. Where's your shotgun?"

Ed Werfel spat in the dust and massaged his yellow whiskers with the back of his bony, weather-blackened hand. He thrust his old suspenders forward with his thumbs as though it was a point of pride with him to venture forth without a gunman beside him on the seat.

"Ain't got one this trip," he said. "Had part way, but I dropped him at Portales. Jack Farley it was, only he can't hold his likker, so I set him down to sleep it off. Feller can't fill up on tequila and then sit in the sun all day. Boils his brains."

Clyde took his hat off and ran his fingers through his hair. It was one of those times when he felt he was ramming his head against a rock. "You got your nerve, all right," he said. "The line is swarmin' with bandits and you come on with no shotgun."

"I ain't afeared of 'em," Ed Werfel said. "I fit against Cochise and I ain't scared of no stage robbers."

"About two breaths ago you was tellin' me what I got to do to help you. Seems a man that needs help like you say you do could be more careful."

"Gosh, Clyde, it ain't me, though I ain't scared, like I already said. It's the dang line. They're more persnickety about gettin' the coaches through than they was before the railroad up and threatened 'em. We got eight-ten months of operation left and we got to hold our schedules tighter'n we ever did. Pride, dang it, that's what it is. Ruint many a man, pride did."

"Then you ought to tell your damn line to get a man workin' on this run, or the railroad, seein' as how you're carryin' their money all the time. I can't always be tryin' to bring you in on this end."

"A detekatiff? Hell, they don't know what one is. They ain't goin' to put one of them on this here run—not with the little time it's got left."

CLYDE helped Werfel hoist the dead gambler into the rear boot, then took hold of the bay's reins and swung on up. It was getting to be the hottest part of the day and streams of sweat were coursing down his back and chest. All around them there the land was shaking and trembling in waves of radiation. The yucca looked like a wind was blowing through it.

Ed Werfel walked with him beyond the head of the span of four.

"Hell, you don't worry about me, Clyde," he said. "I guess you don't need to watch out for me if'n you don't want to. I know it ain't your job, even though I sometimes sound like I might think it is. How come you got your nose into it?"

Clyde looked around without answering, and then, as though there was a re-

lationship between the two thoughts, Ed Werfel said, "I seen Jud, Clyde. I seen your brother, Jud, up the line some."

Clyde sat quietly and kept his voice level. "You did, huh? Well lots of people see him, Ed. I seen him myself, just the other day."

Werfel worked the plug around between the few front teeth he had and chewed on it the way a squirrel might. "I seen him down below Portales some. Down about where they've got with the rail-layin'."

Clyde was not sure why he felt suddenly angry, but he did. It was just like that old gossip to make a tie-in of some kind.

"Did you see him in the bunch that stopped you here?" he said.

"Why, 'course not, Clyde. Leastwise, I don't think he was among 'em. They was all wearin' things on their faces, but they looked kind of like the Arroyo bunch, though." Ed explored a hole in his trouser leg with a finger. "Now, Clyde, I wasn't thinkin' nothin' like that. I was just tellin' you I seen him, that's all."

Despite himself, Clyde got a mocking inflection into his tone. "Well, thanks, Ed, but I don't particularly care where he is or what he does. It ain't my business, nohow."

"Well, maybe it ain't," Ed Werfel said. He rolled a gob of juice into the dust, turned and climbed up to the box and picked up the reins. "And then again, there's some that say it is. I'm just tellin' you, Clyde, 'cause I like you. Even old fools like me hear a thing worth listenin' to now and then. Adios, compadre."

CHAPTER TWO

The Big Take

CLYDE left the road and took the rough but shorter trail to town. Damn that Werfel, he was thinking. Damn him for an old fence-talking woman, picking up notions and twisting them around to suit his own imagination. Damn him and all others like him. They always had to have something to talk about.

It was Jud, of course. It was Jud whose actions down the years had got those tongues to wagging and who furnished idle minds with ammunition. It was him and his badman ways, and he never seemed to give a damn what anybody said, or thought.

Not his own brother, even, or what effect the accumulation of this talk might mean for him. It made Clyde sick at heart sometimes to think about it all. It made him weary to consider the many times he'd taken Jud's defense in some act where he might have been concernd. And it made him hot and sore inside. Sometimes, it made him hate his brother, Jud.

Jud's trouble was in his upbringing. Ten years Clyde's senior, he had just been old enough to take a hand in the last few skirmishes of the Lincoln County War. Both boys were orphaned, and there had been no one to tell him that a man could seldom put a gun down after he'd been packing it around for a time. It got to be like an arm or leg after awhile—no getting shed of it then.

Clyde knew all this and he made allowances for it. He remembered how Jud had come back to Roswell after the last of that was over, and while he, himself, had been too young to understand much of it he knew that Jud had done a great thing and he was proud of him because of it.

He had looked forward to his return with eagerness because he thought sure that Jud would get them a place and take him away from Alec and Selina Hamline. It was just that Jud was flesh and blood, and a person to look up to on his own account.

Jud had got a place for them out south of town a bit, along the Pecos banks.

He had got them this place and he had got Panchito, a homeless waddy, to help out and he had stuck with it for five years and better.

But as Clyde got older and developed a kind of knack for taking the measure of a man, he came to realize that Jud wasn't as happy in that place as he might have been. Jud sometimes had the look of a range horse that was being put under halter for the first time. The kind of look that made Clyde pity him, and be fearful of some day losing him, as well. When it did come he was not surprised, or anyway not as surprised as he might have been.

He had been numb and unfeeling for a few days, but after that he became accustomed to it and accepted it. Panchito had been a great help to him in that time. Panchito was wise in a great many ways and possessed a heart of limitless understanding.

Time had played its numberless hands after Jud had gone away. Time had seen Roswell expand and stretch its sinews. Time had seen the Santa Fe reach clean across the northern counties of the Territory, and cast interested eyes upon the cattle towns lying close along the Pecos on the south. It had seen Clyde Anson grow into man's estate, and in a street fight one time had seen him employ a certain dexterity with a sixgun; a fight which won him prowess and a name, and a city marshal's badge.

Time, also, had brought tales and tidings that would have Clyde's brother riding with a wild bunch up near Denver, dealing faro in a honkytonk in Santa Fe, or maybe meeting the army posts' demands for meat with a long rope and a running iron. Nothing was ever definite about these things, though, and the only thing a person had to go by was the way that Jud had been before he went away.

When he did come back, after eight years on the prod, his actions seemed to imply to Clyde that the things that everybody said were true.

CLYDE was still thinking about all this when he came back into town. Along here were a great many newly-built structures, raw and unseasoned mostly, because the coming railroad had lent an impetus to construction of all kinds. There was nearly every kind of enterprise a man could ask for and a great many of the kind he might not have around at all if he'd been questioned on the matter.

Clyde had his eye on the Arroyo in particular, owned and operated by one-eyed Monte Hagen. There was a small stage at one end where tired and painted women sang raucously and delighted the bleary-eyed onlookers. There were more card and gaming tables in that place than in any other two upon the street, and the click of chips was like the whir of locust wings throughout the night and day.

The men who frequented that place were neither river nesters nor buckaroos of cattle drivers, and they held a high degree of interest for Clyde because of this. More particularly since the stage raiding appeared to be reaching the proportions of an epidemic, and since Jud had come to favor the Arroyo over any other place in town.

Clyde had half a notion to step inside and take a quick inventory, but he did not pursue it beyond the thought. Any tally in there would be inconclusive at best, and he let the whole thing go.

He went down to his side-street office, a place so small that when he was in it with Hodge, his deputy, it was crowded. Even with Hodge in there alone it gave the impression of being little larger than a closet, because Hodge was a big man with no fat on him.

Hodge was leaning into his chair with his feet on the desk, leafing through a pile of new dodgers when Clyde came in

and hung his hat and gunbelt on the coat tree in the corner. He poured a drink of luke-warm water from an Apache jug and sat down, idly glancing at the dodgers as Hodge passed them to him.

"Ike Justin busted out of Huntsville again," Hodge said.

"He's always doin' that, ain't he?"

"Yeah, third time this year as I remember." Hodge took a drink from the jug and settled deeper. "There's a Texas warrant out for a feller named Curly Becker. Been runnin' calves off, it seems."

Clyde gave a short laugh as Hodge passed him the Curly Becker dodger. "Calves, huh? Where in hell's he goin' to feed 'em in summer? In Texas to boot?"

"Might be countin' on a quick turnover in liver," Hodge said. "Fellers got strange tastes, some of 'em."

"I sure wouldn't want no calves on my hands if I was bein' hunted," Clyde said. "In Texas in the summer—gawdalmighty."

Clyde leafed through the others, piled them on the desk and gazed out the window. He knew Hodge was waiting, but he took his time.

"Well, they hit Ed again," he said after a moment. "Got the box. About five thousand in it, railroad money. I heard the shootin', and got there after they made off with it. Ed says there was four—the Arroyo bunch likely."

HODGE gnawed on the knuckle of his thumb. Sitting in his chair that way, he looked bigger than a side of beef. "Five thousand, huh? Well, I guess they can afford it. Anyone hurt?"

"A gambler killed. Name of Henderson. Didn't want them to take his money, Ed said."

Hodge squirmed around and looked through the open door. A clatter of wheels was going by and he was quiet while they passed. Then he said, "Sam Jacobs stopped by earlier. He says they're gettin' up a petition to have us close the Arroyo—close it permanent."

Clyde looked at Hodge. "What in hell for? That's the only place in town where we can keep track of all those gunslicks. Did you tell him that?"

"Mm-hm, I told him. He's got virtue in his mind, though. You know how them deacons can be. They get dang mad when they're feelin' righteous. He says we got to clean the scum out of here. He says we got to have the town clean for the railroad."

"Does he have any notion what it's goin' to be like when them track crews get close enough to come in here on the howl? He ever see a Chinee and an Irish fight it out? Multiply that by a thousand or so and you got yourself an idea of what we're goin' to have here one day. The Arroyo bunch will be like kids playin' in the church yard."

"I don't guess he does know that," Hodge said. "It's just what he said, that's all. Ain't no reasoning with a man like that."

Clyde swore and heaved out of the chair. He took his hat and belt down and put them on. He felt futile and beat up without knowing why. Hodge kept watching him, and spoke softly to him before he reached the door.

"You goin' out to your place, Clyde?"

Clyde stopped and turned around. "Yeah. I'll be back soon. Panchito was cutting a ditch today. I want to see how he's comin' with it."

"Clyde," and Hodge leaned forward now, "Clyde, be careful out there. Maybe I should have told you this before. I seen four of the Arroyo boys ride out north this morning. I think that might have been the bunch that hit Werfel—Doc Tracey, Harry Johnson and Pike Allen."

Clyde felt his neck get warm. "And the fourth?"

"Jud," Hodge said. "I seen 'em all ride north together. And just before you

came back I seen Jud once more. High-tailin' it south toward your place."

Hodge leaned back and took a pull at the jug. "I just thought I'd tell you. You may be hearin' it from others."

Clyde stood there. "Thanks, Hodge," he said. Then he walked out.

CHAPTER THREE

Dead Man at the Forks

THE PLACE that Jud had got for them so long ago stood on a low, broad rise above the river, a few miles below Roswell, off the trail to Carlsbad. Whatever Jud might have been then, or be at this time, Clyde often thought, he had surely used his head in picking out that spot. He had likely had Pa's good head for land gradient and soil fertility, and Ma's eyes for pleasing beauty. The country round about the buildings had the best drainage contour of any in the region, and many a man had cast an eye of envy upon the grove of cottonwoods in which the casa stood.

From a good ways off he saw Jud's mustang standing at the tie-rail, and when he came nearer he did not have to study it to know that it had been ridden hard. This seemed to verify the implication which both Ed and Hodge had made, and he spent no time outside, but went directly into the house.

Inside, he found Jud munching on a slab of beef, and Panchito muttering over a pot of coffee on the stove. Panchito gave him a broad, white smile and inclined his head at a crock of pinto beans.

"Ho, you are just in time, Clyde. We are having something to eat, and you are just in time."

Clyde hung his hat on a spike imbedded in the adobe of the fireplace, and took a seat across the table from his brother. Jud's mouth was full with chewing and for a space of time he regarded Clyde with an amused expression on his face. It was almost as though he knew what might be on Clyde's mind, and it had an irritating quality for Clyde because of it. It was bad enough that Jud should put him into the position that he had, without mocking him on top of it.

"Hello, lawman," Jud said when he'd got everything down and had tamped it solid with a slug of tobacco. "You surely do look all fired up for a hot day. Y'ought to go more easy-like, Clyde. You'll live longer."

Jud's ease seemed to put Clyde at a disadvantage. "I guess there's more'n one in this room that could pay heed to that," he said. "It weren't me that rode through town like a bat out of hell."

Jud put his cup down and regarded Panchito solemnly. "Panchito, is that you our boy is talkin' about? You been ridin' hell-bent across the country today?"

Panchito brought the fresh coffee to the table and sat down, his hand remaining on the handle of the pot. "Me? Panchito? Ride in this heat? I have all I can do to dig a shovelful in the ditch. I would not do that, but we need the water."

Clyde scooped pinto beans onto his plate in generous proportions. His appetite never suffered.

"All right, Jud, come off it. Your horse shows it, too."

Jud finished the last of his coffee and leaned back, tugging his paper and tobacco from his pocket. "And what's wrong with ridin' hell-bent if it pleases me? Through town or anywhere else?"

"Nothin', I guess. You sure covered a lot of ground in the last day, though. Ed Werfel said he saw you up near Portales. Next you was ridin' north of Roswell, and then you was cuttin' back to here. Surprised to see your horse standin' at all."

JUD finished rolling the smoke, and lit it. "I don't know that I like people keepin' track of me that way."

"You more or less bring it on yourself," Clyde said. "You keep mighty strange company for a man that don't like people watchin' him. Near everybody in town's got one eye cocked on the Arroyo all the time. And speakin' of that place, I heard Sam Jacobs is gettin' up a clean-up petition on its account, so it likely won't be a very popular place for you 'fore long."

Jud considered that in silence for a moment, and then he leaned forward with his elbows on the table. His face seemed even thinner when he ran his hands along the sides of it. "Let me talk to you brother to brother, Clyde. I wouldn't go foolin' around with the Arroyo if I was you. There's a bad bunch hangs out in there. If they was to know you was goin' to try somethin', I wouldn't give a peso for your chances. What about it, Panchito?"

Panchito, who did not appear to relish a hand in the matter, shrugged and cupped the coffee mug in his hands. "Who knows? I think a peso is big money for those chances, though. It would be a cerway to lose it—that is certain."

"It ain't my doin'," Clyde said. I only do what I'm told. If the people in town want it closed, why, then it gets closed."

"It's a pretty big thing to crack, kid. If I was you I'd resign before I walked through them batwings with a notion of that sort."

"Maybe you would, Jud." Clyde stood up and pulled his hat off the hook. When he tugged it over his eyes he looked around the room and then at Jud again. "Jud, where would you be standing in a thing like that?"

"Kind of hard to say just now, kid," Jud said. "I guess I'd have to wait and see."

"Maybe so, Jud, but let me tell you somethin'. I think you better make your mind up quick. By now everyone in town knows Ed Werfel was hit again today, and near everybody is likely to know that you rode out that way with Tracey, Allen and Johnson. That's the kind of news that travels fast. It's also the kind that breeds vigilante law. There was a killin' there."

"You think I had a hand in that?"

"I ain't thinkin' nothin' 'bout it. I'm just tellin' you how it looks to some people. A smart man knows a warning when he hears one."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Clyde. Just see you don't forget mine."

CLYDE went back to town. It was the hottest part of a hot day and he rode slowly. When he joined up with the main road Ed Werfel pounded past him taking the Concord south. Ed had a shotgun with him now, which meant he was likely taking care again.

Old Ed had vivid recollections of training his Sharps on Cochise's braves, but Cochise was a thing of the past and the Arroyo boys were in the present and in quantity. It made Clyde laugh to think of all that, even though there was little humor in it.

When he came into the office Hodge had finished with the noon rounds and he gave him his report.

"Tracey, Johnson and Allen are back," he said. "All calm and serene otherwise. You see Jud?"

Clyde sat down and stared through the open door. "Yeah. He was at the ranch. What about the others?"

"I don't know. I guess they was in it, though. I had a chat with Ed about it 'fore he hit his south run. He figures it was them. I guess he didn't want to tell you 'cause of Jud."

"He didn't need to spare me that," Clyde said. "I had my own ideas. Any of the Arroyo crowd would be suspect."

Clyde kept gazing through the door. It was strange discussing Jud objectively like that, but he was doing it.

Hodge came around and put his hand

(Continued on page 116)

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SAVE 2c — STICK COUPON ON PENNY POSTCARD

(Continued from page 114)

on Clyde's shoulder somewhat clumsily.

"This is tough on you, ain't it, Clyde? I sure do wish it was different. It ain't right that kin-folk should be fightin?"

"I know it ain't. I gave him a warning at the ranch, for all the good it'll do. I told him about Jacobs and that petition."

"Yeah, well, I seen Jacobs again, too. It's certain to go through now. This last strike got everybody cooking."

Clyde's eyes were moving along the street outside while Hodge was talking. There was not much activity out there just now. Any sensible person would take it easy for the next few hours. A pair of horses lazed before a hitch rack across the way, and a stablehand slept propped up against the livery down the street. The only contradiction to all that drowsiness was the figure of Sam Jacobs, stalking with wrath and purpose toward the office of the marshal.

WHEN HE came in out of the direct sunlight his eyes stared blindly from his gaunt face until they became accustomed to the comparative darkness of the small room. Doing that seemed to give his expression a peculiar, blank appearance, the way it sometimes was when he was substituting for the preacher in the pulpit, and was wracking his brains for a proper course of assault against the devil. Nobody that Clyde had ever known could give the devil a chase like Deacon Jacobs when he got his mind geared up and on the warpath.

"Clyde," Sam Jacobs said right off, "this-here has got to have an end. This town can't be a charnel house no longer. You got to put a stop to it."

"I believe you're right," Clyde said, "we surely got to do something. Just what was it you had in mind?"

"Among other things you got to close the Arroyo. It's bad enough the country's infested with murderers and bandits, without they use our town as a gathering place, comin' back here after every shootin' and laughin' at us like they are."

"Are they laughin' at us?" Clyde said. He leaned back and watched Sam Jacobs' Adam's apple bob. Sam wore a loose collar and his neck looked rusty and corrugated, like certain kinds of sheet iron that'd been left out in the weather. "Just who is laughin' at us?"

"Why, gol-dang it, everybody is. Them as robbed the stage today sure must be—Tracey and Johnson and that Pike Allen."

"Seems I heard there was four in that bunch. Who was the other?"

Sam Jacobs stood stiff and straight, like he had to force his tongue to form the words. "They say that Jud was. Your brother."

Clyde leaned forward some. He was aware that Hodge was paying him particular attention, as though some kind of trap had been set and he was wondering if it would be wandered into.

"You got proof, Sam? You want to swear to a warrant? Can't do much unless it's legal, unless they're caught at it. What do you say?"

"I don't need no proof," Sam Jacobs said. "It's common knowledge. It's common knowledge that the Arroyo bunch is behind all this stage trouble."

"It ain't common knowledge with me yet," Clyde said. "And I don't move until it is."

Sam Jacobs turned his head and looked through the door. He took a long time shaping up thing that he said next. "All right, Anson, we'll see about that. I've got this petition going around. It ought to be filled by night. We'll see what you'll do then."

"I guess that's fair enough," Clyde said. "Before you go, though, let me tell you something. I wouldn't go talkin' too loud outside anywhere. Gettin' up a petition is one thing, but namin' people for robbery and what-not is somethin'

else. I think you know what I mean."

Sam Jacobs smiled. "Maybe I do know what you mean, and then again maybe not. But I know I'm no coward. I'm not afraid of those people over there."

As soon as Jacobs left Clyde went outside and climbed aboard the bay. This thing was moving too fast now. People like Jacobs had no patience, had no sense for sitting a thing out for a bit. When people like that got their noses into a thing it always precipitated trouble.

Clyde headed for the ranch. He didn't want to go out there again. In fact, he dreaded what he might find when he arrived. But it was in his head and he'd have to know about it sometime. It was likely a betrayal of his trust, but he halfway hoped that Jud would be gone, that he'd had the sense to leave.

If only Jud hadn't been so bold about it there might be a way out of it for him. Why a man should want to parade his badness like Jud was doing didn't seem to make any kind of sense. But Jud always had been a hard one to figure out.

JUD'S horse was gone when Clyde swung down at the tie-rail. He felt halfway glad about that, but there was still the other thing. He didn't stand out there and think about it. He was close now and he had to get it over with. Didn't do any good to stall around, wishing he'd never had the notion in the first place.

Coming inside, he saw Panchito carrying a water bucket to the sink. Something that was in him must have got to the Mexican because he put the bucket slowly down and stood there as Clyde crossed the wide room toward the door in the rear.

"When'd Jud go?" Clyde said.

"Half hour maybe," Panchito said. "Maybe more, maybe less. What is wrong, Clyde? What do you want of him?"

"I ain't sure yet," Clyde said. Clyde

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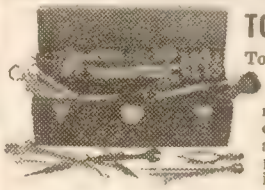

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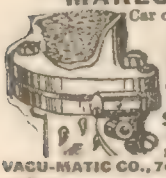

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went out the rear door and Panchito followed him. "What'd he do when he came in this noon?" Clyde said over his shoulder. "Did he stay inside all the time?"

"I do not know, Clyde. But I think once he came outside to look around. When I tell him I dig the water ditch he come out. Yes, I remember that."

Clyde headed for the ditch. When they came to the pile of newturned earth Clyde pulled the shovel out. He jabbed it into the heavy mounds at random, stopping finally when the blade struck something metallic and non-resisting. Stooping down, he pulled up what he'd hoped he wouldn't find—Werfel's strongbox.

"Por Dios!" Panchito said. "So that was it!"

Clyde fumbled with the broken lock and swung the lid back. "Yeah, that was it, all right, and it's no pleasure to find it. Money gone—just the waybills left."

"But he is not like that. Jud, he would not steal this."

"I'd sure like to think he didn't," Clyde said. "We don't know him so well anymore, though, Panchito. Maybe we never did, I don't know."

Clyde stood there in the heat, staring at the box and wishing to hell and back that he'd never had the idea it might be where he'd found it. He stared at the thing as if it was a personal enemy of some kind, and he didn't move until the sound of pounding hoofs came down upon them from the road.

Then he turned and saw one of the half-caste livery hands from town coming through the rear door and stumbling across the rough ground toward them. That man's face had trouble on it.

He was an old man and he had to get his breath before he spoke. Then it all came out in disjointed words and phrases. "You come, Señor Clyde, yes, *si*, come, please. They have killed him and the Señor Hodge has sent me for you."

Clyde was conscious of the edges of the box cutting into his hands. "Killed who? Who's killed? Where?"

"In town they have killed him. Señor Jacobs they have killed. Yes, dead in the road, he is."

CHAPTER FOUR

Final Tally

CLYDE brought the bay up an alley behind the office and put it in the corral with Hodge's horse. When Panchito did likewise Clyde began to argue with him about it all again. It made no difference that they had covered the same old ground before.

"This ain't for you to get into, Panchito. I get paid for it. Only thanks you'll get will be lead."

"Well, perhaps that is thanks enough," Panchito said, "so I come anyway. You should not fight alone."

"I won't be alone. Hodge is here, and there'll likely be others. I figure every man in town will want to help."

"So I come, too. I come to see the Anson brothers fight."

The irony in Panchito's voice made Clyde look at him hard. Panchito did not often get this way, but he was a problem when he did. Panchito could sometimes be like a very old and stubborn burro.

"You don't mind if I ask who you're goin' to side with, do you?" Clyde said, and Panchito smiled.

"Oh, me? Me, I side with the Ansons. Yes, I side with them for many years. Yes, I do. You know that, Clyde."

"You can't do that this time, Panchito. If you're thinkin' of takin' a hand in this it's either with me or the bunch in the Arroyo. It can't be both."

"Well, maybe. We see. I simply fight for the Ansons."

They went through the office and joined

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the group on the street out front. Two or three men were standing there with shotguns, and Hodge told Clyde what had happened.

"Couldn't have been but five minutes after you left that Sam got it," he said. "Right out in front of the Arroyo. He was out there all fired up and shoutin' 'bout the bunch that hit the stage, when all of a sudden there was this shot from a window somewhere and he fell over.

"He walked maybe ten feet before he caved in, and it was a big slug that hit him, too. A Sharps. One of them old buffalo guns, a .45-70, I figure." Hodge clucked his tongue. "Feller had vitality, all right."

"More of that than sense," Clyde said. "I told him that would happen 'less he was quiet."

"There's somethin' you can't tell nothin' to," Hodge said. "It's the extremes of human nature that can't be told. The real good and the real bad. Feller like Sam had convictions. That's all he had an ear for. I reckon he was a pretty good man, for all his bein' foolish now and then."

In the quiet silence Clyde edged forward and peered around the corner at the Arroyo on the other street. The road was empty, as though no person had ever walked upon it. All the buildings on that side had a dead, deserted look, like the people in them had smelled trouble and had gotten out. Even the Arroyo's face was blank, with the horses removed from the hitch rack before the gallery, and the blinds draw on all the windows.

"I suppose they're in there," Clyde said to Hodge after a moment or so. "They fixin' to make a stand of some kind in there?"

"Yeah, they're there," one of the shotgun men said. "Right after Sam got it a feller took the horses around to the corral and then they pulled the blinds."

"Jud's in there, too, Clyde," Hodge said. "I seen him come back to town."

"He had the strongbox out to the ranch," Clyde said. It was in the open now, and there wasn't any sense in trying to keep Jud's part hidden any longer. "He had it buried where Panchito was digging."

"Golly, I'm sure sorry, Clyde," the shotgun man said. "I was hopin' for certain there was nothin' to all this talk. But he was sure flauntin' it."

"He is not bad," Panchito said. "I do not think he steals and kills."

"You better keep quiet," Clyde said to him. "You ain't in company that's sympathetic to your notions."

"Well, it is true what I say, so what can you do?" Panchito said blandly. "You cannot ignore what is true."

HODGE gave Panchito a strange look and Clyde took his arm to distract him. "You got men around the place, Hodge?" he said.

"Yeah, all around. The town's primed for this. Them inside is, too, I guess. They could of run out in the beginning, but they somehow chose to stay. They must figure this is some kind of showdown. Ain't room enough in town for them and the law, too."

"Yeah," Clyde said. "I guess it had to come." He looked around the corner again, then drew back and put his hands on his belt. "Well, we better move in. Might be best after dark, but I don't think we ought to hold this off too long."

One of the shotgun men chewed on the tip of his finger. "No, let's get on with it. Feller goes loco waitin' all day long."

Clyde drew his Colt, thumbed the hammer back to half-cock and inspected the cylinder through the side gate. "All right, then, I guess we better spread out on this side. Got to be careful crossin' that street.

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Best to get well down to either side of the Arroyo before you do. One of you shotguns stay back here and cover them as crosses. Panchito, you come with me."

There was no talking anymore. There was only nodding and foot-stabbing at the ground, and then they broke it up. Clyde went back through the office with Panchito after him. Coming out the rear, they crossed the open space where the corral stood and went down behind the line of buildings which faced the Arroyo.

As Clyde slipped in between a pair of them he heard a single punctuated shot from the Arroyo, kind of like a shotgun. He was in such a position that he could see a portion of that place and it seemed to him that it had come from above the ground floor.

"What the hell?" he said. "What d'you suppose that was?"

He did not ask it as a direct question of Panchito, but he turned his head to look at him anyway. But Panchito was no longer with him.

CLYDE kept on going. He dodged around the packing crates and trash barrels up to the street, then ducked his head out and waved his hand at the shotgun down the line. When the shotgun roared out at the Arroyo's windows Clyde ran low and loping through the dust and drew up in a crouch beneath the front wndows on the Arroyo's gallery. He pressed tight against the wall and looked around.

Well, he was that far anyway. He'd got across clean and that much was over with. It'd be a time getting the others over, though, now that the bunch inside knew what was coming for them. Down the street a bit, he saw Hodge make his try. The shotgun blasted out again and Hodge lumped across. Overhead somewhere a pistol snapped a few times and the dust jumped around Hodge's feet.

But he kept on coming and threw himself in the road below the level of the boardwalk. From that point, he commenced to fire back and Clyde heard glass shattering above him and to the side.

Clyde worked down toward a gallery post. No way of getting in on the floor level, he knew. Had to get upstairs somehow and into one of the rooms up there. Hell, they couldn't be in all of them. He reached the post, swung a dilapidated bench out for support, and commenced to climb.

Damn that Panchito, he was thinking. No telling where that one was now, or what he might be up to. No telling who he was gunning for, either. Feller like Panchito had a complicated way with his loyalties. Sometimes the written law didn't amount to a heap of chico with him. Never could tell what he was going to do when he got that logic in his round, gray-frazzled head.

Clyde got to the gallery roof and squirmed along the red-hot tin plates toward a window. He felt like a side of beef on a slow fire up there. Be done clean through to his backbone, he figured. Hotter'n any place this side of hell.

The blind was drawn on the window and he edged toward the thing with caution. When the burning got too bad he humped up on his feet and steadied himself against the rough, worn siding. He sure would like to know who or what was behind that blind.

It was one of four upper windows on that side, each one for a different room. This particular room was a kind of storage place, as he recalled it, not used much, but you could never tell that it wouldn't be occupied for a thing like this.

He crouched beside it for quite a spell, just listening for a sound in there and having a look around. From where he was he could see a great deal. Most of the others in his group had come across.

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There was only one left, and he was coming now. Clyde saw every move he made. He was being foolish about it, Clyde thought. He should have gone down the street further to make his crossing because the shotgun wasn't there to cover him.

He got it in the middle of the road. Clyde saw the bullets make small dents in his chest, and make his shirt jump away from his back as they went on through. Blood began to seep out of this guy's mouth as he staggered and commenced to run. A couple of yards further on he went down flat.

CLYDE went through the window with his gun in his hand. Seeing the guy go down like that seemed to propel him forward as though his mind had ordered it without even thinking on it. Inside it was dry and hot, and empty. There was no covering on the floor and the old boards spit dust and creaked with loud sounds. Even his breathing sounded tight and rusty in that place. He thought sure everybody in the building must know he was up in there.

There was shooting throughout the building now. It was general and all around him, though most of it was coming up from down below. When he backed the door off the latch the sound of it got much louder, and he didn't hear the approach of one of those who came down the narrow corridor. He just had time to recognize the man before he fired.

As it was, there was a delay in the message from his brain because this man looked much like Jud. But then he recognized Pike Allen and they fired simultaneously, and Allen leaned against the wall and then slid down.

Clyde stepped over him and went down the hall. At the stairway, which was open, he could see the tables tipped up and the men behind them. He was seen from below at about the same time, and

he ducked behind a column as the bullets swept upstairs. He snapped off four rounds from that place and drew blood twice.

He saw Tracey go over with a big crash underneath his table, and a man known around as Big Creek George fell into the bottles on the back bar. Clyde backed off into the corridor again to re-load. He put six into the cylinder this time.

When he was done with it Hodge's crowd was breaking in the rear way and the Arroyo boys were backing up the stairs. They were mostly firing into those who were coming in, but Johnson and another were keeping the upper landing too hot for Clyde to show his face. He backed off down the corridor again.

He tried to find the room he'd come into in the first place, but missed it and went clean around the bar bend in the hall. Back there he stumbled onto Panchito and his brother, Jud.

He saw Panchito first and the Mexican was crouched on the floor shielding Jud, who was leaning in the corner, half sagging to the floor. Panchito had the manner of an animal at bay, a small and valorous animal which had picked a high price at which to sell its life.

Jud's face had a terrible light in it and he was blood all over from his neck down to his belt-line. Clyde stood stock-still, with his gun half-raised, staring at them, and becoming slowly conscious of another door nearby, which stood ajar, and through which were coming sounds of metal on metal.

Jud spoke first. "Don't, Clyde," he said. "Don't go in there, he'll get you sure. He's got a scattergun."

Jud spoke again and Panchito tried to stop him, but Clyde kept going forward. With his foot he kicked the door wide and stepped inside. He saw the desk and the chairs and the overhead lamp and the safe in the corner, and Monte Hagan

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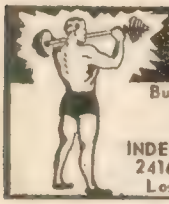

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leaning over it and striking at it with a hammer.

At the same time, Monte Hagan swung his viscous, flat and half-blind face around and slung the shotgun up beneath his arm. The gun slammed out and the buck load shattered the door frame beside Clyde's head.

He felt a portion of the pellets rip his left arm and side, and before the second barrel let go, the Colt bucked against his hand and his thumb smashed off the full cylinder into Monte's body. Monte Hagan dropped the shotgun and straightened up stiff, as if he was trying to take the biggest breath he'd ever taken. Then he crumpled up and fell across the safe.

THEY got Jud downstairs and sat him in the chair. The whole upper part of his body was scored with shotgun pellets, but the wounds weren't deep. But he was a hell of a mess to look at, Clyde was thinking. He looked as if he'd been dragged by Werfel's stage.

"I thought I told you to stay out of this place," Jud said after Clyde had primed him with a bottle of Monte's private stock. "I had everything fixed and then you come along and make a mess of it."

"You're alive, ain't you?" Clyde said to him. "Which is likely more than you would have been if we hadn't stepped in. You had your nerve standing up against Hagan and his crowd."

"Finally worked it out, huh?"

"I did when I heard Monte beating on his safe. It's a stupid man that can't open his own safe when he wants to. When'd you get around to that?"

"After Jacobs got himself killed," Jud said. "I made sure all the stage cash was in it, then jimmied it. He surely did get in a sweat when it came time to move on out. He caught me up there and gave me a load."

"I think I heard that," Clyde said. "I was just then headin' over here. As a matter of fact I remarked upon it to Panchito, only Panchito had just then chosen to duck out on me."

"*Si,* I come here," Panchito said. "I think Jud needs me more than you. He is not bad so it is all right to help him."

"Pretty dang sure of that, ain't you?" Hodge said.

"Oh, *si,* I know it very well. If he was truly bad he would not put the strongbox where we could so easily find it."

Clyde leaned against the bar and looked around. "Workin' for the stage line, is that it?"

"The railroad," Jud said. "They were moving lots of money on the stage route and they had suspicions that Monte's bunch was taking it off every now and then. So they got me to participate more or less. They wanted me to get into Monte's bunch, and I had a fair background for it. I had to convince you people I was really bad, though, and get the same notion into Monte's boys, so they'd accept me."

"You were bad enough, I guess," Clyde said. "Ain't you tired of that now?"

"I'm goin' to raise cattle now, kid. I don't hanker for a badman's end."

"Well, it's mighty nice to hear that, I'll say," Clyde said. "Did you have a hand in this last one against Werfel?"

"Yeah. I couldn't stop the killing, though. Tracey done it. I had all I could do to see that the cash was in the safe at the right time, and then fix it so it'd stay there. I think they was gettin' on to me then. After Sam got killed there wasn't much time. They were set to move, only they couldn't until Monte got his money out. I guess you came in at the right time."

"I guess we did," Clyde said. "I guess we did at that."

THE END

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(Continued from page 61)

blue shirt. "Gil won't mind," she said coolly. "If you're riding on, you'll need it."

"I'm not ridin' on." He stuffed the shirt carelessly into his levis while thought of Greg squared his jaw grimly. He noticed a queer sparkling light in the girl's eyes that he couldn't understand, but it didn't matter. He'd never see her again. "I'm goin' back," he said, his voice hard. "There's somethin' I forgot."

"I'll saddle a fresh horse for you."

In a matter of minutes she led a powerful brown horse up to the porch. Rod climbed into the saddle, turning to touch his hat brim briefly. "So long, ma'am, and thanks."

"Good luck, Mr. O'Neil," she replied evenly.

Rod jerked around, startled. "You know—knew all the time who I really was?"

"Yes. Gil rode out last night with the news. He and his wife and men scattered to tell the other ranchers, figuring you'd be needing plenty of help at that trial today."

The full import of her words hit Rod all at once. He burst out with bitter self-accusation, "But *you* knew I was runnin'!"

"Grief does funny things to people," she said softly. "You must have loved him very much." Impulsively she stepped toward the horse, holding out her hand and smiling warmly. "I expect, now, to be here all winter, Mr. O'Neil. Come out when you can."

Rod took her hand, swallowing hard at the tight cramp in his throat. It would take time to lick this thing, but he was fighting again now. And he was no longer alone.

"Yeah," he said huskily. "Yeah, I'll do that."

(Continued from page 30)

ing: And where were you, Roberto, during the fighting? Your friend, Don Capitan Diaz, was in the thick of it. He was shot in the chest. You—*oye!*—a scratch. Capitan Diaz is a hero. Tell us, Roberto, just where were you hiding?' Better had I died! Now—no longer will the señorita have the eyes of love for Don Rober—"

Suddenly, Enrique's head was dumped on the floor and a tornado flashed across the room toward Don Roberto.

"So! You worry about the *señoritas,* do you?" Carmela raged. *"Por Dios!* If I ever catch you looking at another woman, I'll—I'll—"

Suddenly, she was down on her knees, with Don Roberto in her arms. "Oh, Roberto!" she whispered. "Roberto *mio!* Always will you cause me the heartaches. But I love you." Her soft lips brushed Don Roberto's more than willing ones. Then abruptly, she drew away from him and looked down.

"But just the same, *novio mio,* as soon as you wipe out what's left of Riega's *revolunistos,* no more escapades! Because the next *gobernador* of Sonora is going to find that he has a hotheaded, jealous wife!"

Don Roberto's answer was shut off by a pair of soft, red lips. But he was agreeing with her. No more escapades! At least—not for a while. And then only little ones!

Capitan Enrique Diaz smiled ruefully as Manuel Ortiz slipped a tunic under his head. It looked as if the fat *señora* with ten *niños* would be his nurse.

For Don Roberto Agurierra y Torreon had been conquered at last. And, because he was a very clever hidalgo, would no doubt manage to stay ill for quite some time.

Si, Diaz sighed, thinking of the fat *señora.*

THE END

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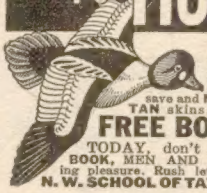

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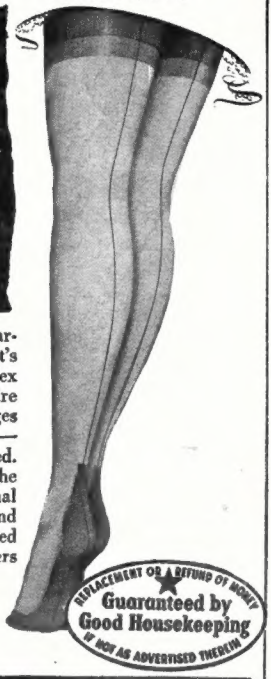

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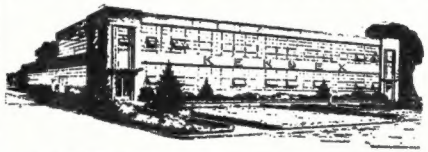

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